



Speculative stories about Nicola Bulley dominated front pages for weeks

## An extraordinary media frenzy

**N**icola Bulley was missing for 23 days before her body was found on 19 February. The recovery and identification of her body brought to an end a period of intense concentration by the media on the case, as well as an unprecedented level of coverage on social media, with YouTube and TikTok broadcasters turning up to film the river bank where she disappeared.

Zoe Williams in *The Guardian* described it as ‘a carnival of hysteria’ which fuelled conspiracies, speculation and fantasy.

It also prompted a bitter attack on the media by her partner Paul Ansell on behalf of her family. The relevant parts are worth quoting, partly because they were not given much

**Granville Williams** on the issues raised by media coverage of missing woman

prominence in those newspapers which were the worst offenders (with the exception of the *Daily Express* which carried the statement in full).

These are the key sections.

“One day we will have to explain to them (Nicola’s daughters) that the press and members of the public accused their dad of wrongdoing, misquoted and vilified friends and family.

“This is absolutely appalling. We tried last night to take in what we had been told in the day, only to have Sky News

and ITV making contact with us directly when we expressly asked for privacy. They again have taken it upon themselves to run stories about us to sell papers and increase their own profiles. It is shameful they have acted in this way. Leave us alone now.

“Do the press and other media channels and so-called professionals not know when to stop? These are our lives and our children’s lives.”

But what will happen now?

The two named broadcasters, Sky News and ITV News, were immediately contacted by the regulator Ofcom which will conduct an investigation into their conduct. If they have broken any rules action will be

● Continued on Page 8

### EDITORIAL

## BBC Chair Richard Sharp should go

**D**id former *Newsnight* presenter Emily Maitlis have Richard Sharp in mind when she talked of ‘Tory cronyism at the heart of the BBC’ in last year’s MacTaggart lecture?

It was the *Sunday Times* on 18 January which first revealed Sharp’s involvement in the provision of a loan to Boris Johnson during the period when he was being appointed the BBC Chair.

Since then his position has become unsustainable. The DCMS Select Committee recalled Sharp because of his failure to disclose this information in his pre-appointment hearing in January 2021. Its report said he had made ‘significant errors of judgement’.

The broadcaster Jonathan Dimpleby and former Fleet Street editor Baroness Patience Wheatcroft are among those calling for Sharp to quit.

NUJ members at the BBC also gave a clear verdict in a recent poll. 95% said its chairman, Richard Sharp, must immediately resign for failing to disclose his role as a go-between for a loan to the then Prime Minister at a time when he was applying for the corporation’s top job.

Michelle Stanistreet, the union’s general secretary, said, “Sharp has done the unforgivable – he’s become

● Continued on Page 8



The media have amnesia about the economic policies which caused the 2008 crash

No media outlet can cover everything. That is impossible. But what is left out, what is not talked about can be more important than what is covered.

Television, radio and newspaper silence underpins many of the problems with the way major social and political issues are covered. What follows are some general comments on why this problem is so serious.

#### Crisis

Fifteen years on from the financial crash of 2008 the quality of life for most people has worsened. The wave of industrial action that erupted in 2022 is one symptom of this. So too are inflation, appalling levels of poverty, the staffing and funding crisis in the NHS, public services and local government.

What is the cause of all of this? Well if you read the papers or watch TV there are lots of short term, highly debatable explanations on offer. Inflation is caused by a hike in global demand for goods and energy and is fuelled by wage increases. Poverty is an accidental product of a range of factors; deindustrialisation, low educational achievement, work-shy people.

Local government and public services need to be more efficient, and face up to the necessity for austerity. The NHS crisis is the result of an ageing population, or a 'crisis' in social care, or the impact of Covid,

# Silence in the media

**Tom O'Malley** on how our media forgot the real culprits of the 2008 crash and reshaped the narrative to justify austerity

or, again, of the need for more efficiency. The country has to 'pay its way' and cannot 'afford' to spend on wages and better services.

The media are focused on the here and now. So, long-winded explanations of why things are the way they are, are ruled out. Yesterday's news is dead news.

But the media still sneak in 'explanations' of the sort outlined above. These simply avoid engaging with different explanations from alternative voices. This is not new. Years ago the Glasgow Media Group showed how the way TV framed industrial news was hopelessly skewed towards

**Public services have been decimated by cuts and privatisation**

the interests of industry leaders and government. Recently Mike Berry and Laura Basu have shown that the coverage of the 2008 crisis and its consequences was framed to avoid regular discussion of explanations which ran counter to those offered by the government and the City of London.

#### Silence

The effect of framing issues in these ways is a silence about other, fundamentally important explanations.

Since the 1980s, the economy has been restructured. The effects of this are, arguably, at the root of so many of the problems we face

The collapse of local bus services is a direct consequence of the privatisation of public transport, coupled with lack of subsidy to local authorities, and the failure to invest in public transport roads. Local Authorities' finances have been

slashed with privatisation and contracting out forced on them. This is expensive. Every year, £4.6 billion is spent by central and local government on procurement exercises needed to award private contracts.

The crisis of funding in the NHS is in part because the government has increased levels of privatisation. The LSE has calculated that something like 25% of the NHS budget is spent on private companies. The profits taken by private companies mean less money for the NHS. As far back as 2005, the Private Finance Initiative (PFI) which forced the NHS and local authorities to borrow to build new facilities had created £35bn of new public debt without any proper evaluation of its financial consequences.

Unison has pointed out that we will pay £217 billion in 'user charges' for PFI between now and 2033. £20 billion has been paid in extra borrowing costs for the 700 projects that successive Labour and Tory governments acquired under PFI.

Privatisation has been accompanied by tax breaks for the very rich, and a relaxed attitude by governments to the enforcement of tax rules. Poverty has been fuelled by the weakening of trade union power and the spread of part-time, casual and zero hours contracts. Public services have been decimated by a combination of cuts and privatisation.

*MediaNorth* readers will be aware of much of this. But the basic point is that an adequate explanation about the problems which parade across our screens and pages demands regular discussion of longer term explanations from a range of viewpoints.

Much of the media has filled their silence on the long term causes of the crisis with disconnected, highly limited, and often inaccurate explanations. Other voices and explanations have been systematically excluded. Keeping silent means the media simply amplify the voices and perspectives of the powerful. The silence needs to be broken.

Barry White on the decision to drop government plans to privatise channel

# What next for Channel 4?

**C**ampaigners, including media unions, have welcomed the announcement by the then culture secretary, Michelle Donelan, to scrap plans to privatise Channel 4. Instead, the government proposes to introduce measures to allow for Channel 4's 'long-term sustainability' and help it 'better compete in the age of streaming giants'.

Whilst the decision to scrap privatisation is welcome, the devil is in the detail, much of which is unknown. There are some worrying aspects. Just what measures has the government in mind to allow for Channel 4's 'long-term sustainability' and help it 'better compete in the age of streaming giants'? We do know that one proposal to be included in the yet unseen media bill will be to relax the restriction on Channel 4 to enable it to produce its own content rather than having to outsource everything to external production companies.

In an article for *The Media Leader* (11 January), Raymond Snoddy, media consultant and former presenter of the BBC's *NewsWatch* wrote: "The big problematic issue ... is her [Donelan's] decision to allow Channel 4 to produce and monetise its own content for the



Seth Wales/Wikimedia

The Channel 4 headquarters at 124 Horseferry Road in London

first time. In a pointed response in an interview on Channel 4 News, chief executive Alex Mahon said the Channel had not asked for such a thing.

"Allowing Channel 4 to produce and own programmes also seems like a reasonable liberalisation, yet it could lead

**It could pioneer new ways for the audience to be involved**

to considerable tensions between the broadcaster and the independent producers who provide most of its programming. Forty years of a co-operative relationship will be replaced by a climate of competition — one in which smaller indies could get squeezed. Will such a new competitive relationship be fair to indies? Or will the channel's new internal commissioning teams, if that how it is organised, get their hands on the best ideas?"

Let's not forget the impor-

tant role many small independent producers played in the campaign against privatisation.

So are we also happy to go back to the status quo, or use this decision to ask just what is Channel 4 for - is it just another commercial broadcaster? The Media Reform Coalition (<https://www.mediareform.org.uk/>) offers an alternative view: "...This would have a renewed remit to serve young people and minorities, and offer new avenues for participation and accountability. Rather than trying to compete with Netflix on the terrain of reality TV or generic dramas, where it will always be outspent, a People's Channel 4 could do something totally unique. It could pioneer new ways for its audiences to get involved and tell their own stories, make the most of the opportunities provided by digital technologies to go beyond one-to-many broadcasting, and reinvent what public service media should be for the 21st century..."

The decision not to privatise the channel does open up the possibility of a more radical approach to commissioning programmes to reflect the diversity of our society and the multiplicity of 'unheard voices'.

**MN**

Sylvia Harvey looks back on four decades of the broadcaster

## Channel 4 at 40 still fourth most popular

At the mature age of forty Channel 4 now faces a future still owned by - but not financed by - the public. Born in 1982 it had just three competitors; now it faces over 90 UK-licensed channels.

Astonishingly it still holds on to its place as the fourth most popular of these channels - after BBC1, BBC2 and ITV and just slightly above Sky.



Channel 4 logo, 1982-1996

It remains almost entirely financed by advertising revenue with perhaps more of a skew

towards a younger audience than its elders. The independent leftist and avant-gardist film-makers of the 1970s joined their more powerful fellows from the world of TV in calling, successfully, for 'innovation and experiment in the form and content of programmes'; wording that remains in the legislation to the present time.

However, Britain has

changed significantly since then. Since 1979 there have been some thirteen years of Labour government and some thirty years with the Conservatives in power. Since the early 1980s Channel 4 News has flown the brave flag of political independence. Now it's down to the rest of us to make the changes that justice and decency require.

**MN**

Nick Jones on the dramatic changes in the public face of the labour movement

# IT'S ALL CHANGE! Hostile media can't ignore public support for striking workers

Try as they might Conservative propagandists and their press supporters are likely to face an uphill task in the run up to the next general election if they try to take political advantage from this winter's industrial turmoil.

Images of striking nurses waving placards outside hospitals or train crews peacefully picketing railway stations will scarcely have the same damaging impact as the anti-union campaigns of previous decades.

Any attempt to recycle yet again press photographs of rubbish piled up in Leicester Square or coffins waiting to be buried on Merseyside from the 1978-79 Winter of Discontent is hardly likely to resonate with the public's recollection of the determined yet dignified defiance on display during the winter of 2022-23.

Week after week countless thousands of nurses, ambulance crews, paramedics and teachers have staged peaceful protests on strike days in their dogged campaign to secure pay increases to compensate for inflation.

Even their sternest tabloid critics have been forced in their coverage to reflect the reality of their readers' experience.

Opinion surveys suggest two

thirds of adults have continued to back the walkouts despite the disruption to health care and schools. Only a third of the public think the unions have too much power.

In a lifetime reporting industrial unrest I cannot recall an era when the unions have managed to deliver with such spectacular success such a sustained run of photo-opportunities that have captured the mood of the moment.

When asked who is responsible for the impasse, the public appear to blame the government, back the trade unions, and express support for teachers, nurses, and other public sector workers.

Hostile columnists and headline writers will face a stern test of their credibility if they attempt to demonise those at the forefront of what has been a remarkable eruption of rank-and-file anger after years of wage restraint.

However hard they might turn to the past in harking back to the days of mass meetings in car parks to authorise

**Determined  
and  
dignified  
defiance  
on display**



Women have outnumbered men on the picket lines

strikes or violence on picket lines, the Conservatives' cheerleaders will be up against far more appealing visual reminders of collective action.

They will be unable to ignore the cumulative impact of what has been a dramatic change in the public face of the labour movement.

United and co-ordinated campaigning by a new generation of union general secretaries is rewriting some of the basic tenets of industrial reporting.

Women now lead many of

the country's highest profile trade unions. They have been out there on the doorsteps with their striking members appealing in vain for the Prime Minister and his cabinet colleagues to sit down and negotiate.

Pat Cullen, leader of the Royal College of Nursing for the last year and a half, has been an almost constant presence on marches and protests up and down the country in support of what for the RCN has been unprecedented nationwide strike action.

What has also been so strik-



# A great deal of disarray in anti-union media

## From Page 5

ister, ‘Nurses: clock is ticking Rishi...do a deal for Britain’ (11.1.2023). *Express* columnist Stephen Pollard threw his weight behind the strike: ‘The nurses’ case is overwhelming. Do the right thing Rishi.’ (7.2.2023).

Unusually for the *Sun*, its headline writers and columnists have lacked consistency in their assault on the unions.

‘Sunak must do a Maggie and take on militant unions’ was the advice of *Sun on Sunday* columnist Nile Gardiner. (8.1.2023) A picture montage contrasted a 1984 photograph of Arthur Scargill with Mick Lynch on an RMT picket line.

Nile concluded that once

again it was the unions versus the people with leaders such as Lynch the modern heir to Scargill: ‘Callous, uncaring and with an extreme socialist agenda.’

In a further attempt to find a relevant comparison, the *Sun*’s headline the following month harked back to the shutdown for the covid pandemic and claimed it was ‘Lockdown 2023’ (1.2.2023) with 500,000 workers out on strike.

Perhaps the clearest illustration of the disarray among

**Public demonstrations of the depth of anger at government**

the anti-union commentariat was Andrew Neil’s column in the *Daily Mail* (4.2.2023) which predicted the strikes would soon start to dissipate:

‘These strikes are proving the unions no longer have the power to paralyse the nation – just as I warned Mick Lynch in the summer.’

Many would argue with Neil’s verdict on the strength of the unions.

The objective of today’s selective and co-ordinated industrial action is to stage public demonstrations of the depth of anger among the rank and file and warn the government and employers that their employees believe they are being treated unfairly.

In previous years, however

just their cause, the unions have often failed to win public backing.

If the opinion polls continue to suggest that two thirds of Britons support the striking nurses, a weak Conservative government, with a general election in the offing, should perhaps take heed.

Judging by the inconsistencies in the direction of the tabloids’ response, reflecting no doubt their inability to ignore the scale of picket line demonstrations – and the resolve of the strikers – the Conservatives cannot be sure that their press cheerleaders will be able to deliver a sustained and effective pre-election campaign that demands another crackdown on the unions. **MN**

# Major publishers ‘compromising quality’ of media

**M**ore than 300 local newspaper titles closed between 2009 and 2019. If this dangerous trend continues local news coverage could disappear. To counter this trend a new report from the DCMS Select Committee calls for more government support.

“Our inquiry has found that existing support for local journalism tends to go to the largest, multi-title news publishers,” the report claimed.

It said this ‘disproportionate share’ can be ‘to the detriment of smaller publishers and those entering the market’, and this may be ‘stifling much-needed innovation that could benefit the sector as a whole’.

The report highlights ‘the harmful impact on communities’ from the decline in access to local news. This included a

decrease in participation in civic life, less scrutiny of local government decisions and increasing levels of polarisation and misinformation. Deprived areas of the country miss out on coverage.

It recommends the government works to ensure that more support for local journalism reaches smaller publishers, many of whom are driving innovation that could help sustain the sector as a whole. The report also wants an audit of how public money is spent so this this can be distributed ‘more fairly’.

The Public Interest News Foundation (PINF) has welcomed the report and called on the government to adopt its recommendations as a matter



**The committee’s acting chairman, Conservative MP Damian Green: “Local newspapers have struggled to keep their heads above water.”**

of urgency.

The charitable foundation was set up in 2019 to promote the unique contribution that independent news providers make to society.

Jonathan Heawood, executive director of PINF, said: “We are thrilled that the committee has recognised the immense value that local news

brings to democracy. We are particularly glad to see the committee’s acknowledgement of the crucial role played by small, independent news publishers.

“These publishers must be fairly remunerated by the big tech platforms if they are to thrive in the digital economy. They must also be able to access public funding and philanthropic support as the committee recommends.” **MN**

● You can read the report here: <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/33635/documents/183838/default/>

Nick Jones reviews book that shows how the *Mail* covered the UK's shortest serving Prime Minister

# From Hero to Zero

## TRUSSED UP

How the *Daily Mail* tied itself in knots over the Tory leadership

Liz Gerard

Bite-Sized Books / £15.99

**R**uthlessness is the characteristic that defines the Conservative hierarchy once they realise a party leader is a dud and must be ditched.

For cheerleaders on the Tory tabloids, there has to be a smart about turn: from hero to zero, as headline writers and columnists eat their words and hail a new saviour.

Standing on their heads is a routine Fleet Street's finest have perfected over decades, especially when their sleight of hand can be disguised, or perhaps explained away, by a hectic pace of events in Downing Street and Westminster.

When it comes to the defenestration of the powerful, the *Daily Mail* has perhaps no equal in the national press, so full marks to Liz Gerard for puncturing the pomposity of a newspaper that likes to claim it commands the pinnacle of British journalism.

*Trussed Up* is Gerard's rollicking account of the editorial somersaults that were required by the *Daily Mail* as it hailed and then denounced the UK's shortest serving Prime Minister.

Day-by-day, after Boris Johnson's resignation, the front-page splashes glorified Liz Truss and savaged Rishi Sunak, only to be contradicted as her Premiership fell apart.

Coming to terms with three different Conservative Prime Ministers within less than four months tested the editorial ingenuity of the ever-loyal *Daily Mail* to the point of destruction, but Gerard fillets her catch almost with a degree of affection as she dissects more than 100



What a difference a few weeks make. *Mail* front pages veer from euphoric praise to a demolition job.

news reports and editorials.

Her book is packed with page after page of colourful illustrations of front pages, feature articles, and OpEd columns together with a pacey commentary that captures the frenzied hyperbole of Mailspeak.

### Decoding meaning

For a student of the language of popular journalism Gerard identifies and explains the meaning of a lexicon of adjectives and phrases. Her decoding of favourites such as 'backlash', 'troubling dossier', 'cynical stitch-up' and so on is delivered with a wry smile.

Gerard has great fun with my personal bete noire – 'senior Tories'. This term, she says, has the fluid definition of someone in authority, perhaps an ex-minister or veteran MP, but which in my experience was of

ten cover for a fictitious anonymous quote.

Having spent a lifetime in newspapers, including many years as a night editor at *The Times*, and becoming a founder judge of the British Journalism Awards, Gerard clearly sympathised with *Daily Mail* staffers as they toiled away having to shape their coverage to reflect that day's editorial diktat.

After spending countless hours out on assignment with journalists from the *Daily Mail* and other tabloids I often found myself commiserating with their plight.

While I faced the immediate deadlines of a broadcaster, they were often having to wait to hear from the backbench about the line that their paper intended to take. Until they knew the direction, and how hard to go, they could not start

filing their copy.

Writers told me the hardest taskmaster was the *Daily Mail*. Once commissioned to write an OpEd and briefed on the objective of the piece, there was almost always pressure to go further.

One said it was like riding a shark: a writer might only want to go so far, but that was rarely enough, there had to be blood on the floor.

Gerard's compilation of the *Daily Mail's* contortions over Truss's tenure of 10 Downing Street is a masterclass of the challenges facing journalists having to write to order.

Readers will wish they could have been a fly on the wall as the *Mail's* backbench sharks showed no mercy for columnists and leader writers amid the twists and turns of unprecedented Tory turbulence. **MN**

# It's time for BBC Chair to go

● From Page 1

the story, for all the wrong reasons. This is damaging the BBC, its staff and its reputation. The NUJ believes the BBC and licence fee payers deserve better.”

*Byline Times* has also revealed that Sharp gave £40,000 to the Institute for Policy Research (IPR) a right-wing

think tank which has supported *News-Watch*, whose content is hostile to the BBC, as well as the Centre for Policy Studies and the TaxPayers' Alliance, both also hostile to the BBC.

Damning too is the revelation by former BBC North American editor Jon Sopel that Sharp was involved in the interview for the post of chief

executive of BBC News. This action crossed a clear line between the BBC's editorial impartiality and the politically appointed chairmanship.

A review into Sharp's behaviour during the BBC appointment process is being undertaken by Adam Heppinstall KC. Seems like an open and shut case. **MN**



## Think tanks: good or bad?

**T**hink tanks have had a bad press recently. Deservedly so, with the focus on a number of right-wing libertarian think tanks which have exerted overt influence on Tory government policy. These think tanks include the Adam Smith Institute, Institute of Economic Affairs (IEA), Policy Exchange and the Taxpayers' Alliance.

These organisations also receive prominence through their representatives appearing on broadcast media and being quoted in national newspapers. They got more publicity during the Liz Truss election campaign and her disastrous, short-lived government. However, policies inspired by them, such as freeports, promoted by the IEA and Centre for Policy Studies, remain at the heart of the government agenda.

Join us at this year's MediaNorth Festival of Debate online event on Thursday 11 May 6.00-7.30pm. Chair - Louise Houghton, Editor *Yorkshire Bylines*. Speakers - Professor Julian Petley, expert on the links between think tanks and right-wing media, and Sam Bright, former Investigations editor *Byline Times*, now Deputy UK editor *DeSmog*.

### Diary date

We're at the South Yorkshire Festival again on Sunday 6 August at 3.00pm in the Unison Room, Wortley Hall. Nick Jones is a confirmed speaker. **MN**

## Media frenzy over missing woman

● From Page 1

taken.

But the newspapers, with the exception of *The Guardian*, are signed up to IPSO, a regulator set up and funded by the newspaper owners.

Clause 4 of their Code covers Intrusion into Grief and Shock and states: 'In cases involving personal grief or shock, enquiries and approaches must be made with sympathy and discretion and publication handled sensitively.'

Rather than acknowledging that newspapers may have a case to answer, their response has been to go on the attack, deflecting attention to the role of Lancashire Police and social media.

Media commentator Raymond Snoddy believes it is 'imperative that IPSO launches its own inquiry into the press coverage of the disappearance and death of Nicola Bulley to see if the allegations made against sections of the national press are justified'.

Well, we'll see what happens – but don't hold your breath. **MN**



YouTube: 10 Downing Street

As press secretary to Thatcher, Ingham was central to the combative approach to trade unions

## Bernard Ingham, Margaret Thatcher's press secretary

By Nick Jones

**H**aving been at the sharp end of the economic turmoil of the Thatcher decade we industrial reporters knew all about the power and influence being exercised behind the scenes by the Prime Minister's press secretary Bernard Ingham.

Our abiding regret is that we never had the chance at the time to interrogate him at first hand over his contempt for the leadership of the trade union movement and his astute ma-

nipulation of the news media on Mrs Thatcher's behalf.

Ingham was without doubt the most successful head of government information of his era, and the last beneficiary of the cover that he and his predecessors enjoyed thanks to the loyalty of political correspondents at Westminster.

Rarely was he identified as the begetter of infamous briefings in Downing Street. Lobby journalists stuck to the rules and attributed information and guidance to unidentified 'government sources'. **MN**

● The full version of Nick's article is here: <http://www.nicholasjones.org.uk/articles/categories/political-spin/37-spin-by-government/384-how-bernard-ingham-manipulated-news-agenda-in-1984-85-miners-strike>