



PUTTING MEDIA REFORM AT THE TOP OF THE POLITICAL AGENDA

We need to talk about media reform. Why?

Broadcasting, the internet, social media and the national and local press are the means whereby the majority of us receive information about the key issues that affect our everyday lives.

A democracy needs a healthy and diverse media. But, for good reason, many people do not trust the media that we currently have. We need media that are fair and informative, but too many media outlets are neither. Even public service broadcasters, such as the BBC, often do not live up to the standards set out in their own codes of practice and policy statements.



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Today fewer people are directly dependent on the mainstream media for their news and information than used to be the case, relying instead on various forms of social media. But these in fact draw heavily on the mainstream, and tabloid newspapers in particular are filled with sensational ‘clickbait’ stories specifically designed to make their way online.

Furthermore, the online world (with the notable exception of online versions of national newspapers) is soon to become subject to an unprecedented degree of censorship and surveillance via the misleadingly titled Online Safety Bill, which may well cause services such as WhatsApp and Signal to withdraw altogether from the UK market.

Although relatively few people now read daily papers, a significant number of these

have very considerable power over our daily lives because of the way in which the dominant Conservative-supporting press has largely become the propaganda arm of government. This, not Parliament, is the forum in which, increasingly, policy is promoted and legitimated. And in the event of a Labour government – however moderate – being elected, that press will be utterly relentless in its opposition to it.

Those with political influence should be putting media reform at the top of their agenda. Here are eleven points that any reforming government should commit to if it is to deliver a healthier media environment and defend and develop democracy. They highlight a number of the major issues that we should be talking about, now.

Broadcasting and Online Media

ONE The BBC needs to be made more accountable to the public that it serves,

and government influence over it needs to be reduced. One way to bring this about would be to change how the Corporation is governed – in particular, legislation should be introduced which takes out of government hands decisions about the level of the Licence Fee and appointments to senior positions.

TWO All commercial television and radio services in the UK are licenced by the Office of Communications (Ofcom), which also regulates the BBC in certain respects. Ofcom publishes the Broadcasting Code, a series of rules which all broadcast content on television and radio must follow. Licensed broadcasters must comply with the terms of their licence, which includes obeying the Code, or risk having it revoked.

The commercial public service broadcasters ITV and Channel 4 have particular public service obligations, and channels such as Sky News, GB News and Talk TV are also subject to obligations, such as the impartiality regulations enshrined in the Code.

However, Ofcom has proved itself far too keen on promoting commercial as opposed to public service values in the media which it regulates, and has been subject to considerable criticism over its failure to enforce its impartiality regulations in the case of GB News and TalkTV. We need to radically transform Ofcom’s governance and purposes and charge it with setting tougher rules regarding ownership and public service values in the commercial media, rules which protect and promote public service standards.

In particular it should minimise the influence of commercial values on media content – for example, clamping down on ‘news’ channels which promote controversy as a means of ratings chasing, and on sponsorship deals and hidden commercial promotions (known as branded content).

THREE Particularly in light of the above, there should be a new organisation charged with promoting the making of

public service content for TV, podcasts and social media apps. This could be funded by a levy on the major media tech companies – Google, Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp etc. These companies currently benefit from extremely low levels of taxation: they should be required to contribute to society by supporting public service content.

FOUR The media need better regulation. The BBC and Ofcom are run by boards whose members are drawn from highly unrepresentative groups, mainly from the upper echelons of the media industries. Regulators should be run by a wide range of those involved in these media, including trade union representatives, as well as by those drawn from the wider listening and viewing public. Media regulation is also too important to be left to those appointed by government.

FIVE The infrastructure of the online world is dominated by a tiny handful of extraordinarily powerful companies that are both hostile to external forms of regulation and highly opaque when it comes to their own forms of content moderation.

Such companies should be held ultimately responsible for the information that travels on their systems, but heavy-handed state censorship of the internet and the attendant surveillance of its users, as in countries such as Russia and China, is wholly undesirable, although it is threatened by elements of the mis-named Online Safety Bill.

However, internet service providers should certainly be required to establish clear, publicly available codes relating to the kind of content that they will and will not allow. They also need to be entirely open about any blocking or filtering that they undertake.

As a general principle, material that is legal offline should be legal online. All forms of online regulation should adhere to the requirements for freedom of expression online laid down by bodies such as the UN and the Council of Europe and should be entirely in line with the European Convention on Human Rights.

Press – On and Offline

SIX Artificial Intelligence offers many benefits to society, but our awareness of its potential needs to be balanced by a clear sense of some of its more negative implications. The use of AI in the creation of ‘news’ poses a genuine threat both to journalism as an occupation and to the public interest in communications, not least when it comes to the matter of trust.

It poses risks not only to jobs but also to the quality of reporting and requires strong regulation in order to enable readers to identify the sources and creators of media content. Immediate steps must be taken, in consultation with news providers and trade unions, to manage its impact on both news content and employment practices.

SEVEN The government should launch a new fund aimed at improving the supply of public interest news on a local basis in order to fix the effects of the damaging decline in the number of local newspapers and journalists in recent years. This money should be used to support independent, locally-based, community-orientated news providers, and not to subsidise those private companies that have spent decades cutting journalists’ jobs on local papers whilst handing out extremely generous dividends to shareholders.

EIGHT We still allow some of the largest newspaper publishers to regulate themselves through their own – now widely discredited – organisation, the Independent Press Standards Organisation (IPSO).

The Leveson Inquiry, which was set up in the wake of the phone hacking scandal, recommended the establishment of a truly



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independent regulatory body that would provide a cheap, speedy and effective complaints procedure for the public. The industry was always determined to crush this proposal and did so partly by persuading the government not to sign into law Section 40 of the Crime and Courts Act 2013. This would have required all publishers to either sign up to a Leveson-compliant regulator or be liable for their own and the defendants' legal costs in the event of a complaint going to court.

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inquiry, this time into the relationships between journalists and the police, and into corporate governance failures at news organisations. The government refused to implement this. It must be implemented.

Ownership

NINE The laws governing media ownership and cross-ownership need to be revised. It

should be made much harder to build up concentrations of ownership in areas such as television, the press or the online world. Where high degrees of concentrated ownership already exist, more effective forms of regulation of media content, informed by public interest values, are required in order to prevent media owners exploiting their media holdings for their own political and ideological ends.

The Digital Divide

TEN Many people, for largely economic reasons, are still unable to access the digital infrastructure which plays an increasingly crucial role in modern life. And many of those who are physically able to access it lack the skills to navigate it in such a way as to inform themselves of matters in the public interest. These are both aspects of the digital divide, which needs to be remedied by government action.

Media Education

ELEVEN Given that media, in all their forms, are central to the political, social and cultural life of our society, it follows that the school curriculum at all levels should include programmes in media education. These would provide children and young people with the knowledge and critical skills needed to navigate and assess the nature of the content they will be exposed to throughout their lives. **MN**

MediaNorth

- **MediaNorth** is published quarterly by the Campaign for Press & Broadcasting Freedom (North). www.medianorth.org.uk. We are also on Facebook: **Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom North** and Twitter **@campaign_and**
- CPBF (North) believes that diverse, democratically accountable media are essential for our democracy. That's why we have taken this initiative to promote our policy ideas for media reform at the October 2023 Labour Party conference in Liverpool.
- We think media policy should be at the centre of Labour Party policy debates, not pushed to the margins.
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