

## REFORM THE MEDIA – REFORM SOCIETY

**T**he media, and especially those which provide news, are absolutely vital to the health of democracy.

They are supposed to inform citizens about their society and the wider world. But if the media misinform and mislead people, or fail to report matters of vital public interest, then they represent a grave threat to society.

Today, far 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 draw heavily on the news agenda of the mainstream, and tabloid newspapers in particular are filled with sensational ‘click-bait’ stories designed to make their way online. Although relatively few people now read daily papers, these have considerable power over their 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, decided and legitimatized.

In a democracy, the press is supposed to hold the powerful to account on the public’s behalf. In the UK, however, the Conservative-supporting press is not simply in bed with the government, it is itself one of the most powerful and unaccountable institutions in society. It doesn’t matter in the slightest if you don’t read these papers – your life is being shaped by the power which they wield.

The misinformation that such papers routinely spread has played a leading role in precipitating disasters from Brexit to Truss, and their unrestrained aggression threatens workers’ rights, trade unions divides the country, threatens minorities, invades the privacy of innocent members of the public and makes evidence-led policy-



Above: In February former culture secretary Nadine Dorries conducted an obsequious interview with her old boss and former Prime Minister Boris Johnson on her Friday night show on TalkTV. Left: *Daily Mail* cheerleads for disastrous policies pushed by the short-lived Prime Minister Liz Truss



making all but impossible.

This contributes significantly to levels of trust in the UK media being strikingly low by global standards. It might be argued that low levels of trust in untrustworthy papers shows healthy scepticism and media savviness among the public, but this does not do away with the basic fact that, in a democracy, people need and deserve

media on which they can rely to inform them.

Although regional and local news provision is more highly trusted and far less politically biased and compromised, it is also in desperate straits. Print titles are closing or being hollowed out, broadcast provision is shrinking and ‘news deserts’ are opening up across the country.

Once it was reasonable to claim that the marked right-wing bias of much of the national press could partially be offset by the public service broadcasters, who are required by law to remain impartial. However, in recent years, the BBC has been thoroughly browbeaten and weakened by the government, and has shown itself all

too willing to shadow the agenda of the government-supporting press.

Meanwhile the body meant to regulate commercial broadcasting, the Office of Communications (Ofcom), appears to have abandoned the impartiality requirements of its own Broadcasting Code. It has done this by licensing the openly partisan “news” channels TalkTV and GB News, with the latter being allowed rapidly to become the UK equivalent of Fox News.

So, wider awareness of the crucial importance that the media play in society is vital – as is support for a programme of fundamental media reform.

### In broad terms, this is what is required:

- Make the BBC more independent of government (as recommended by the House of Lords Communications Committee), more representative of those it serves and more answerable to them.
- Make journalism at every level subject to effective regulation in the public interest. In 2012 the Leveson Inquiry - a judicial public inquiry into the culture, practices and ethics of the British press following the News International phone hacking scandal - recommended that press standards be regulated by a body independent of the industry. This recommendation should be fully implemented.
- Part Two of the Leveson Inquiry - which was intended to examine relationships between journalists and the police - should be initiated, as promised by Parliament in 2011.
- An independent national body should be created to support public interest journalism regionally, locally and nationally – as recommended by the 2019 Cairncross Review and endorsed in 2023 by the Department of Culture Media and Sport select committee.
- Ofcom should be required to abide by both the spirit and the letter of its impartiality regulations.
- Ownership of the news media should be far more rigorously regulated in order to protect the national interest, the operation of democracy and the freedom of journalism to perform its proper functions.
- Ofcom should take a much tougher stance in promoting public service values in the commercial broadcast media, minimising the influence of commercial interests on content by clamping down on sponsorship and hidden commercial promotions (known as branded content).

**The implications of social media, content creators and AI must be fully evaluated in order to ensure that they serve the public interest and are not permitted to be simply the playthings of powerful global commercial forces.**

- The benefits for society of such a programme of media reform would be transformative. Healthier journalism

means a healthier democracy at all levels and in every part of the country:

- The public would be far better informed.
- The powerful, both in the political sphere and the corporate sector, would be made more accountable; this would increase our protection against the kinds of corruption and abuses of power which have so disfigured our society in recent times.
- Journalists and news publishers would be made more accountable for their failures and abuses to properly independent regulators. This would provide the public with more effective protection against unethical and indeed criminal media activities.
- Reforms of this kind could enable freer, more balanced public debate, so opening the path to wider changes. At present real reform – of welfare, education, health, policing, justice, immigration, transport, defence, foreign policy, the constitution, and indeed the media – is all but impossible because of the unaccountable power of a small number of media organisations over government policy and their ability to poison public debate by means of generating disinformation and spreading propaganda.
- Every reliable public opinion survey repeatedly demonstrates that the majority of people of the United Kingdom are not mean-spirited, bigoted, isolationist, vindictive and jingoistic, even though this is the impression of ‘public opinion’ repeatedly given by the dominant news media, particularly the national press. Reformed and properly regulated, the media can help to give the public the politics it deserves.

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## MediaNorth

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**CPBF (North)** believes that diverse, democratically accountable media are essential for our democracy. That's why we have produced this leaflet to promote our policy ideas for media reform at this Labour Party conference.

We think media policy should be at the centre of Labour Party policy debates, not pushed to the margins.

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