

Media North

medianorth.org.uk

CAMPAIGN FOR PRESS AND BROADCASTING FREEDOM (NORTH) • OCTOBER 2024 • £1

Publication regularly attacks BBC coverage of Israel

Senior BBC figure at heart of *Jewish Chronicle* scandal

By Granville Williams

In September the *Jewish Chronicle* was forced to retract a series of articles which contained fabricated quotes from Israeli officials.

The articles, published by a freelance reporter named Elon Perry, included explosive revelations from a document supposedly discovered in Gaza.

However, the Israeli army stated that it had no knowledge of such a document, and several Israeli outlets began to question Perry's identity and professional background.

The Israeli +972 website (which, along with *Haaretz*, stands out for its independent reporting amongst Israel's media) questioned his claims of having served as a commando during Operation Entebbe and being a professor at Tel Aviv University for 15 years, as there appear to be no records confirming these assertions.

Four high-profile columnists announced that they would no longer write for the paper. Another contributor, an academic, Colin Shindler, subsequently resigned. In a letter to the editor, Jake Wallis Simons, he wrote, "During your editorship, the *JC* has become sensationalist and unbalanced in its coverage. The Elon Parry incident was an accident waiting to happen."



Robbie Gibb has influenced appointments to both the BBC and *Jewish Chronicle*

Focus has now shifted to the role of Robbie Gibb, Teresa May's former spin doctor and BBC board member, reappointed for a second four-year term as a non-executive director, in March 2024.

In 2021 the *JC* was bought

by a consortium, and Gibb was listed as the 'sole person with significant control' at Companies House.

We now know that, after the new owners took control, Gibb made a habit of calling into the office early on print days to check up on what stories were topping the news list and offering a view. Gibb said that the new owners wanted more views 'well to the right of the Tory party'.

Gibb also interviewed candidates for a senior editorial job and appointed Wallis Simons.

Gibb resigned as a director of the *JC* in August - the reason for the resignation is not known - and there is silence from the *JC* about who really owns it.

The BBC's new chair, Samir

Shah, has said the BBC's next far-ranging inquiry into its own standards is almost certain to be a review of its reporting of the war in Gaza. That will be overseen by the five-person Editorial Guidelines and Standards Committee. Gibb is a member of this committee, an appointment which some at the BBC think is 'absolutely monstrous'.

At the very least Gibb could save Dr Shah any embarrassment by resigning from the Editorial Guidance and Standards Committee. But his interference in BBC appointments, like trying to fix who should chair the BBC regulator, Ofcom, does raise the question of whether he is a fit and proper person to be a BBC director. **MN**



Elon Perry had front page reports in the *Jewish Chronicle*. As the scandal broke, the paper published a piece, by Trevor Asserson, lashing out at the BBC management and attacking veteran BBC Middle East Correspondent, Jeremy Bowen

Julian Petley on the focus by the right-wing press on freedom of expression

Whose freedom?

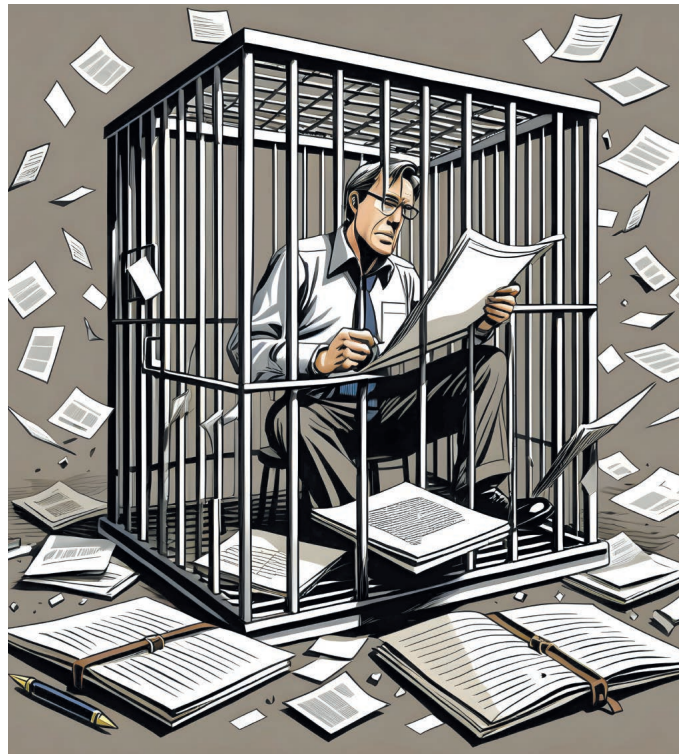
In summer 2024 the right-wing press became greatly concerned about renewed threats to press freedom (that is, as it conceives it). This was on account of the Brazilian government blocking X, the arrest in France of Telegram CEO Pavel Durov (like Musk, an avowed free speech fundamentalist), the government's decision to stop commencement of the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act, and the arrest and sentencing of those accused of inciting and/or being involved in the summer rioting.

Official reaction to the role played by social media in the riots was exploited by the right-wing commentariat to spread fears that the government was planning a crackdown on freedom of expression online, focusing in particular on hate speech and disinformation, and to warn that this could be extended to other media, including the mainstream press itself. This is the classic 'slippery slope' argument so beloved by such papers.

Conspiracy theorist

One of those featuring in numerous articles was conspiracy theorist Bernie Spofforth, who was widely reported as being the first person to post false information about the identity of the Southport murder suspect. The rioting followed and she was subsequently arrested for allegedly stirring racial hatred by spreading false information. On 18 September Cheshire Police announced that no further action would be taken against her, because of insufficient evidence.

Spofforth was highlighted in an article by Isabel Oakeshott in the *Telegraph*, 14 August, headlined 'Keir Starmer is going on a terrifying crusade against free speech'. This denounced her arrest as a 'grotesquely disproportionate reaction' and accused Cheshire Police of 'finger-wagging' for describing her arrest as a 'warning that we are



all accountable for our actions, whether that be online or in person'.

In this, Oakeshott saw 'the harnessing of the machinery of state to silence Right-leaning writers, commentators and other free thinkers' and drew parallels with the pandemic 'when lockdown critics were disgracefully smeared and vilified by government agencies'. She also claimed that 'we are now seeing it again, in relation to immigration'.

In her view, 'the gleeful public parading of a particular cohort of (white) criminals' was 'quite sinister', but at least she refrained from sympathising with them.

Not so, however, Fergus Kelly

This is the classic 'slippery slope' argument so beloved by right-wing newspapers

in the *Express*, 28 August, who claimed that the consequences of the government's 'ever narrowing parameters' of freedom of speech can be seen 'in some of the dubious prison sentences handed down to those who expressed opinions online about the riots – no matter how deeply offensive most of us would acknowledge some of those comments to be'.

On 16 August the *Telegraph* published an article headed 'We can no longer say that Britain is a free country'. This was by David Frost, now a regular player in this particular scare narrative, who argued that not all of those punished for their actions post-Southport were guilty of issuing threats and inciting violence. They were prosecuted, in his view, because 'our legislation goes much wider than that, to criminalise far wider categories of speech and messaging. It's now being used, brutally, by a government that has little real regard for free speech'.

The legislation in his sights was the Communications Act

2003, the Public Order Act 1986 and the Online Safety Act 2024 (somewhat awkwardly, this last was the creation of governments which he served), all of which, in his view, contain prohibitions which show that 'the political and professional classes more broadly are obsessed with so-called misinformation or disinformation'. Consequently, "'fake news" is now a crime in Britain, and people are being prosecuted for it'. Again, we are teetering at the edge of the slippery slope: "We are, in fact, all vulnerable. Say the wrong thing in the wrong way at the wrong moment, and any of us might find the police at our door."

Fake news

The same line was taken by Frank Furedi in *The Times*, 15 August. Under the headline 'Labour's war on free speech is the real threat to public life' he argued that:

"Labour's estrangement from the ideal of free speech is not confined to regulating social media. For its censorious activists, terms such as disinformation and fake news serve as a medium for delegitimising the principle of free speech."

Frost, Furedi and Oakeshott are, of course, free speech fundamentalists in the Musk mould, who believe that the press should have exactly the same ability as individuals to express itself. However, the CPBF has always argued that such freedom amounts to little more than the freedom of press owners to do exactly as they will with their property – and their employees too. Such untrammelled press power in the hands of vast, unaccountable and frequently reactionary corporate interests is actually a threat to press freedom properly understood as the freedom of the press to safeguard the public interest, to act as the public's watchdog and to speak truth to power – very much including corporate power.



Frédéric Legrand – COME0 / Wikimedia

Vincent Bolloré. Media owned by Bolloré regularly stand out for their blatant use of disinformation and propaganda

The media and far right in France

The treatment in the French media of the personalities and priorities of Jean-Marie and then Marine Le Pen, and of Jordan Bardella and his new generation of fast-talking, well-dressed fascists has been of tremendous help to the far right.

In France, political argument is particularly carried in weekly magazines such as *Le Point*, *Le Nouvel Observateur* and *L'Express*, and in interviews of political leaders on the TV and radio, such as the half hour interview every morning on national public radio France Info.

In the times of Jean Marie Le Pen, who led the Front national from 1972 to 2011, talk shows could get record audiences by inviting him as a guest. Le Pen made the most of it. He declared notably that the existence of the gas ovens was “a detail of Second World War history”. Informed that one Jewish singer, Patrick Bruel, had joined others in protesting against the FN, he commented about there being “a whole ovenful” of his opponents soon. The media loved these incidents.

'Image detoxification'

Since Marine Le Pen, the daughter of Jean-Marie Le Pen, became president of the Front national (later named Rassemblement national – National Rally) in 2011, a determined and generally successful campaign of 'image detoxification'

John Mullen on how the French media treat the new-look fascists

has taken place.

The media was very generous in inviting the new-look fascists to speak. In particular, far right billionaire Vincent Bolloré bought stakes in many media companies. He now owns Europe 1, the biggest private radio station in France, CNews, a hard right 24-hour TV news channel, as well as two celebrity news magazines and *Capital*, an influential economic monthly.

Fascist provocations still drew in millions of viewers. A few years ago, the RN leader tried to whip up a scandal about Muslims praying outside. She claimed the Muslims were trying to “occupy swathes of territory, neighbourhoods in which religious law applies” and implied this was similar to the Nazi occupation of France.

The main framing of media stories has been to treat the fascist organisations like ordinary parties and their leaders as celebrities. *Le Point* ran a front-page feature in 2024 “What

Fascist groups use media events to spread ideas about their fantasy of 'genocide against Whites'

psychologists think of our politicians”. The photos of Marine Le Pen and radical left leader Jean-Luc Mélenchon were displayed in parallel.

As the danger of a RN government became imminent in June 2024, endless articles asked how your savings or your mortgage would be affected by a far-right government.

Recently in celebrity magazine *Gala* we could see Marine Le Pen in a nursery school classroom (““What kind of vegetables do you like to eat?”, she asked a little girl”) and another article told of the reasons for her splitting up with her partner.

Fascists being presented as ‘normal’ celebrities helps them build support. Shocking stories of far-right candidates having photos of them in Nazi uniforms on their Facebook pages, or RN leaders declaring (in private) that all Jews are liars took up far less space.

Otherwise, the support by much media of far-right talking points has been extremely useful to Le Pen. The fabricated controversy around full-body swimsuits worn by some North African women in France, which hit the headlines in 2016, or the banning of long North African dresses ('Abaya') in schools in 2023 are good examples.

Far-right transphobia and

moral panics about so-called ‘gender theory’ are also spread widely by the media. Broader media tendencies towards increasing personalisation and sensationalism in all news stories have helped facilitate the rise of this reactionary content.

Tragic crime stories, such as the murder of a 12-year-old girl in 2022 (apparently by a young woman who came to France from Algeria a few years earlier), are used to open ‘debates’ and moral panics about society ‘falling into savagery’ and, in turn, fascist groups use these media events to spread ideas about their fantasy of ‘genocide against Whites’.

Key battleground

The radical Left does manage to get its message across in the media thanks to determination and some journalists who foreground serious questions and not smear campaigns or personality contests. And the alternative media, whether YouTube channels of the Left or dedicated radical publications, are an important tool. This is a key battleground, and we are fortunate to have independent watchdogs such as Acrimed (founded by activists in 1996) to build vigilance and carry out popular education. **MN**

John Mullen is a Marxist living in France and active with the France Insoumise (France in Revolt)

Nicholas Jones analyses how the Labour government has given the Tory press the am

Labour's post-election

After failing to dent Labour's general election campaign, Conservative supporting newspapers have found the new government an easier target.

From the start Keir Starmer and his ministers were so focussed on blaming their predecessors for leaving a £22 billion black hole that they relaxed their pre-election grip on trying to influence and manage the news agenda.

Unlike the early months of the Blair government, when Alastair Campbell immediately imposed tight control over the government's information service, the incoming Starmer administration paid little attention to attempting to forestall potential attack lines from the Tory press.

Rachel Reeves is the first high profile casualty, wounded by an unrelenting and hard-hitting offensive by titles such as the *Daily Express*, *Daily Mail*, *Sun* and *Daily Telegraph* which are campaigning for a U-turn over her surprise withdrawal of the winter fuel allowance from millions of pensioners.

Finding ways to sustain an assault on what is claimed to be the unfairness of the Chancellor's hasty cut in public spending is in the DNA of these newspapers.

Reeves' timing played into the hands of the Tory press: a subsequent hike in energy prices and mounting fears about the impact of a cold winter have succeeded in generating news lines that can be refashioned time and again in the months ahead.

Once in campaigning mode, re-working a running story with a new angle and a fresh splash is standard practice for tabloid newspapers.

Damaging furore

While their scare tactics failed to cut through during the general election campaign, the saga over the potential for hardship among pensioners has become a damaging talking point.

Alarmist front-page stories inevitably attract attention during radio and television press reviews

Labour has given Tory press ammunition for hard-hitting offensive

and reproduce well on screen and on social media.

Reeves' plight recalls the anguish of a newly installed Conservative Education Secretary who was forced to impose drastic spending cuts required by the 1970 Heath government.

'Thatcher Thatcher Milk Snatcher' was the gibe that haunted Margaret Thatcher after she ended free school milk for the over-sevens - a decision which years later she admitted had caused 'a terrible row' from which she still recoiled.

While the press attacks on Reeves have not reached - so far - the same level of personal vitriol, her image has taken a knock over

a self-inflicted and damaging furore which could have been averted.

Labour has no convincing answer to the charge that within three weeks of taking office it selected pensioners as the least deserving of support when ministers were busy signalling hefty wage increases in the offing for train drivers, junior doctors and other public sector workers.

The Treasury has admitted that when Reeves announced that winter fuel allowance would be limited to those on pensioner credit, no assessment had been made about the impact on the millions of pensioners not in re-

Reeves' timing played into the hands of the Tory press: a hike in energy prices and fears about the impact of a cold winter

receipt of additional support.

There had certainly been no impact assessment as to how this decision might be turned against Labour by their traditional foes in the Tory press.

They were determined to put Keir Starmer through the wringer after the washout of their efforts

munition they need to attack it

media challenge



Debts piling up at GB News

By Tony Burke

GB News' financial woes continue. Three years after its launch the channel is still losing tens of millions of pounds a year.

GB News pre-tax losses hit £42.4 million for the year to the end of May 2023, up from £30.7m a year earlier.

Jacob Rees-Mogg's short-lived spell as a GB News presenter could soon be up. Chief executive Angelos Frangopoulos signalled in the *Financial Times* that the former MP for North East Somerset 'might be past his sell-by date' after losing his seat in the general election.



One GB News big earner is Reform MP and pub bore Lee Anderson on £100,000 a year. This is a long way behind Nigel Farage who received £97,900 a month as a GB News presenter, according to the register of MPs' income from secondary employment.

The Guardian has also revealed that GB News paid Conservative MPs more than £660,000 in appearance fees and salaries since it launched – against just £1,100 to Labour MPs.

A boycott campaign by the pressure group Stop Funding Hate, which attempts to divert advertising from media groups that it says promote 'fear and division', has contributed to losses.

The channel's attempt to foment an 'anti-woke' crusade and stretch impartiality rules as a UK version of Fox News has so far lost it £100m. **MN**

during the election.

Reeves should have been advised that any move to cut winter fuel allowance should have been left to her first Budget when it could have been presented as part of an overall package and when moves might have already been made to increase the uptake of pensioner credit and the benefits that go with it.

Labour's vain hope that any backlash might subside over the summer was entirely misplaced. Press readership is weighted heavily in favour of the elderly.

A 'crusade to save winter fuel payments' for pensioners was a no brainer for the *Daily Express* which has regularly given over its front page to warnings of the 'cruelty of allowing OAPs to freeze in the winter'.

From the very next day after her announcement the attack lines could not have been more direct: ... "It's a targeted attack on those who've devoted their working lives to nation" (*Daily Express*) ... "Mugging grannies? That wasn't in the manifesto" (*Daily Mail*) ... "Winter is com-

ing" (Sun).

Headlines wrote themselves

Compounding Reeves' discomfort was the government's inept handling of the 14 per cent three-year pay settlement for train drivers.

No sooner had Transport Secretary Louise Haigh agreed the deal than the drivers' union ASLEF announced a fresh series of Saturday strikes on LNER.

Before signing it off, surely Haigh should have insisted that a condition of this settlement was that it cleaned the slate of any outstanding disputes.

Her department must have known that ASLEF's executive and membership are renowned for their solidarity and independence and proud of their

The headlines wrote themselves: Labour had given in to its union paymasters while punishing pensioners

reputation as the trickiest of trade unions.

There was relief all round when ASLEF called off the LNER strikes, but the headlines wrote themselves: Labour had given in to its union paymasters while punishing pensioners.

Given the Conservative Party's preoccupation with its leadership election, Labour might have hoped for a honeymoon during their first 50 days in office.

Such is the firepower which can be marshalled by Tory newspapers, only too willing take up the reins amid the Conservatives' disarray, there is still no escaping from the Blair government's mantra that, before making an announcement, ministers must take into account from the start the kind of adverse news coverage their policy decisions might attract.

Starmer and his team have been reminded in no uncertain terms that the task of minimising media misrepresentation requires a disciplined approach – and not just during an election campaign. **MN**

Tony Sutton reviews a biography of Paul Foot, the public schoolboy who became one of Britain's most celebrated campaigning journalists

Tireless champion of the underdog

Paul Foot was, at the time of his death in 2004, the top investigative journalist in Britain. Working mainly for non-mainstream media such as *Socialist Worker* and *Private Eye*, as well as the *Daily Mirror*, he brought justice to many people convicted for crimes they did not commit, earning the title of Journalist of the Year in 1972 and 1989, Campaigning Journalist of the Decade in 2020, and winning the Orwell Prize in 1994.

Now, an insightful biography, *Paul Foot: A Life in Politics* by Margaret Renn, his colleague for 10 years at *Socialist Worker* and the *Mirror*, paints a detailed and compelling portrait of the privileged son of a British diplomat who became a tireless campaigner against political thuggery, corporate greed and social injustice.

From Oxford to Glasgow

Foot was born in Haifa, Palestine, in 1937. He spent his early years in England and Jamaica before attending public school and Oxford University, where he told an interviewer, "It was not a very big step to become

PAUL FOOT A LIFE IN POLITICS

Margaret Renn
Verso / £30

an editor of some newspaper or a Labour MP or a Labour minister" – just like his uncle Michael, a former editor of London's *Evening Standard*, who was to become leader of the Labour Party in 1980.

Foot's first step on this political initiation came in 1961 when Hugh Cudlipp, a family friend and boss of the *Daily Mirror*, offered him a job on Scotland's biggest tabloid, Glasgow's *Daily Record* where Cudlipp said, "he would learn a thing or two."

However, what he learned in Glasgow was not what Cudlipp had in mind. Any thoughts Foot may have had of becoming a Labour MP were discarded soon after he met Tony Cliff, a founder of what became the Socialist

Workers Party, and socialist activist Harry McShane.

Convinced that real political change would come from below, he took over as editor of the International Socialist monthly paper *Labour Worker* (now *Socialist Worker*) and began a lifelong devotion pursuing the ideals of a worker-led social revolution.

Leaving Glasgow, Foot worked for the pre-Murdoch *Sun* and *Daily Telegraph* before joining public school colleague Richard Ingram at *Private Eye* in 1967.

This was, he said, his personal revolution: "I still recall the overwhelming sense of liberation. Off my back were the cloy-

ing hierarchies, the silly office intrigues and petty censorships which stifled so much writing in the official press."

This 'liberation' led to an endless stream of exposes, including the Poulson affair – an investigation into top-level corruption in the construction industry, which led to the resignation of Home Secretary Reginald Maudling; and government collusion with the arms industry in supplying arms to Iraq.

Bottom of the pile

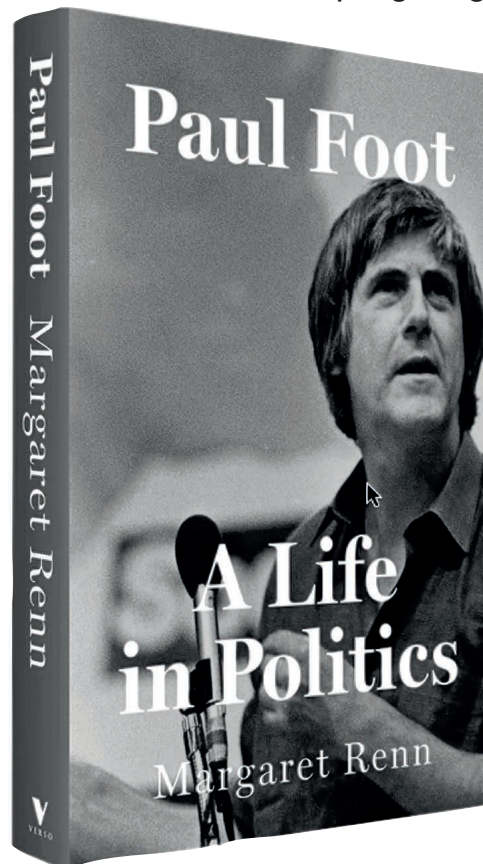
In 1972 Foot began a stint at the by-then-weekly *Socialist Worker* where he produced "by far the best work I did", inspired by "the people who were fighting at the bottom of the pile," before beginning a high-profile 14-year spell at the *Daily Mirror* in 1979.

However, four years after joining the paper, Foot raged in a column written for *Socialist Worker*: "I was bought last week by a bloke who hands over a banker's draft for £113.4m."

"That bloke was Robert Maxwell, who drowned in 1991 after 'falling' from his yacht in the Mediterranean. Shortly afterwards, it was discovered he had plundered hundreds of millions of pounds from the company pension funds, writes Renn, who recounts Foot's jubilation in the months that followed the revelations, "not because Maxwell was dead or the pension fund empty, but because the editors took control: 'We had a wonderful year, there was a democratic spirit because there was no one in charge, no corporate control,'" said Foot.

The newspaper even "gave unconditional support to the miners' strike, calling on its readers to march in their support."

However, the euphoria didn't last. The paper appointed a new proprietor, David Montgomery, a former editor with Murdoch's *News of the World* and *Today* newspapers, to save the group from bankruptcy.



Paul Foot: Essential reading

Paul Foot: A Life in Politics provides an insightful immersion into the life of a journalist who was described by MP Tony Benn as "one of the most outstanding journalists of his generation: courageous, clear, principled and influential". Readers who may be unfamiliar with his work will find *Words As Weapons* (Verso 1990), and *Articles of Resistance* (Bookmarks 2000) – two volumes of his newspaper columns, investigations and essays provide valuable insights into the tireless work that led to his accolade as Britain's Campaigning Journalist of the Decade in 2000.



The new boss promised to retain jobs and union recognition but the sackings began almost immediately as Montgomery got rid of everyone associated with the union, and what he called ‘the old Mirror culture.’

“Paul’s departure was spectacular,” writes Renn. “To prove a point about freedom of the press, he devoted his entire column to the bullying of his own management, the people discredited by their association with Maxwell who continued to sit on the board, and the raft of journalists from the Tory-supporting *Today* newspaper who were now working for the *Mirror*. Much to Montgomery’s annoyance, Paul also detailed the eye-watering share options Montgomery had been given by the board: 1,475,409 shares, to be precise.

“But the bulk of the page was dedicated to the people who had been driven out. Just three weeks after Montgomery arrived at the *Mirror*, one hundred casual journalists had been locked out. No one bothered



A delighted Paul Foot displays the *Daily Mirror* page that he handed out in the street outside the office after the paper refused to publish it in 1993

Photo: Mark Crick

to forewarn them; their passes were simply cancelled, preventing them from getting through the front door,” she adds.

That page never appeared in the *Mirror*, but on the morning of March 26, “Paul stood on the steps of the Holborn building and gave out copies of his page to people going into the building, and to an array of journalists and news media outside.

“His final *Mirror* page was reproduced in the *Journalist*, the *Press Gazette* and *Socialist Worker*, where he was at pains to explain why he had continued to work for a monster like Rob-

ert Maxwell but could not go on any longer under David Montgomery. At first, he had thought it was about censorship. As long as Maxwell did not touch his page, it was worth keeping the column going.

“Silence about Maxwell’s own activities was worth the freedom to expose others, and to sustain the relationship he had with his working-class readers. What in fact changed was the appalling union busting,” adds Renn.

Foot’s response to his sacking? “When the editor, who is a ferocious defender of free speech, wouldn’t publish the page and then told the world I was off my rocker, there didn’t seem much point in hanging around.”

Once again, it was back to his old refuge at *Private Eye* – income supplemented by a fortnightly column in the *Guardian* – where he dug deep into child abuse scandals in North Wales, the murder of Stephen Law-

rence and the Pan Am mid-air bomb explosion that killed 259 passengers and crew and 11 people on the ground at Lockerbie in Scotland.

Six years later, Foot spent six months in hospital after collapsing with a ruptured aorta, which left him disabled. He returned to work at *Private Eye* and the *Guardian*, and died, aged 66, on July 18, 2002, en route to a holiday in Ireland.

Superb craftsman

Paul Foot: A Life in Politics provides the first detailed analysis of the work of a superb craftsman who deployed his political eloquence and extraordinary passion in championing society’s underdogs.

We can only imagine what Foot would have made of the shenanigans of the political and media charlatans whose lies derailed the social revolution promised by Jeremy Corbyn, helping give this country 14 years of Tory misrule, followed by the post-election blunders of recently-elected Labour PM Keir Starmer.

The last word belongs to his uncle Michael Foot who led the tributes at a memorial service after Foot’s death: “It’s very sad thing, indeed, to wake up in a world where there’s no Paul Foot. I owed so much to Paul. We had a few arguments which were going on right up to the end. And I won’t go into who was winning them.” **MN**

Paul Foot: Four must-read books

Paul Foot was the author of 12 books and many pamphlets. The following are full-length accounts of his most important investigations. All are available at Amazon and other sellers of used books.

- ***Who Killed Hanratty?*** Jonathan Cape, 1971
- ***The Helen Smith Story: Paul Foot in Cooperation with Ron Smith***, Fontana, 1983
- ***Murder at the Farm: Who Killed Carl Bridgewater?*** Sidgwick & Jackson, 1986
- ***Who Framed Colin Wallace?*** Macmillan, 1989

A foolish, inept ban on broadcasting

On 18 October 1988 the Tory Home Secretary Douglas Hurd imposed an unprecedented broadcasting ban. It was now illegal for British media to broadcast the voices of anyone speaking on behalf of eleven named republican and loyalist groups in Ireland.

It was direct censorship, targeted at Republicans and the IRA, and instigated by Margaret Thatcher to cut off the ‘oxygen of publicity’ to them.

The ban remained until 16 September 1994, only removed by John Major after it became an obstacle to peace talks after the ceasefire in Northern Ireland.



It was preceded by several decades of indirect censorship against the broadcast media before and during the Northern Ireland conflict. Indirect censorship had long operated through a

combination of pressure against broadcasters from Stormont and Westminster politicians and the institutionalised self-censorship of the ‘reference upwards’ system practised by broadcasters.

The Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom (CPBF) played an active role in campaigns to end the broadcasting ban.

In 1993, on the fifth anniversary of the ban, the CPBF published *Interference on the Airwaves* by Liz Curtis and Mike Jemson. It documents how, between 1959 and 1993, over 100 programmes on Northern Ireland were banned, censored or delayed.

The CPBF’s *Free Press* was printed with a front page END THE BROADCASTING BAN in September 1994. We had to print STOP PRESS stickers saying ‘Two days after *Free Press* was printed, John Major announced the lifting of the Broadcasting Ban’.

Now 36 years later a 26-minute documentary, *The Ban*, directed by Roisin Agnew, uses archive and contemporary interviews to cover one of the more surreal aspects of the ban – the use of actors to do the voiceovers. First used in a Channel 4 *Dispatches* documentary in which Stephen Rea voiced Gerry Adams, it was soon used by all broadcasters. **MN**

Plans to sell *Observer* opposed

The surprise news that the Scott Trust was in exclusive talks with Tortoise Media to sell *The Observer* brought an angry reaction. The National Union of Journalists Joint *Guardian/Observer* chapel passed two strongly worded resolutions at a meeting in mid-September.

The first stated: ‘The chapel is united in its opposition to the sale of *The Observer* newspaper to Tortoise Media. The sale is a betrayal of the Scott Trust’s commitment to *The Observer* as part of the Guardian News and Media family.’ It went on, ‘... there is no security for *Observer* staff, freelancers or the newspaper itself once it is owned by a relatively small business with scant resources to withstand any headwinds.’

The second chapel resolution stated, ‘...the Scott Trust has betrayed its principles and



The Observer: For sale.

prior commitments in agreeing to talks with a third party about the sale of *The Observer* newspaper.’ It concluded, ‘We have no confidence in the Scott Trust and its trustee members to pursue the Trust’s mandate.’

James Harding, formerly Head of the BBC’s news operations and editor of *The Times*, is

running Tortoise Media. In the face of a threatened strike by *Observer* journalists, the *Financial Times* reports Harding will make a direct appeal to them. He told the *FT* that his plan was based on the model of *The Atlantic* magazine which was losing millions of dollars a few years ago but is now profitable with one million subscribers in 2024 attracted by the quality journalism and Pulitzer prizes it has won.

Harding’s ideas for *The Observer*’s future have won wider support, including from media commentator Raymond Snoddy who writes, ‘It looks as if *The Observer*, which began publication in 1791, may be about to receive a new lease of life in a deal that makes more sense the longer you look at it.’

We’ll have to wait and see whether the journalists on the paper believe this. **MN**

The art of class war

Nick Jones gave a lively and informative presentation at the South Yorkshire Festival held at Wortley Hall, South Yorkshire, on Sunday 18 August. Nick drew on the personal archive collected when he covered the 1984-85 miners’ strike to look back at the way news cartoonists covered the strike.

It was a well-attended event and his talk prompted plenty of discussion and questions.

We plan to produce a publication which will develop the points Nick’s presentation made and also include an extensive selection of cartoons from the strike. The aim is to publish it early in 2025.



NUM banners of Murton, Vane Tempest, Dawdon and Seaham

Seaham 40th Anniversary event

The banners of the four pits around Seaham, County Durham were on display on Saturday 28 September to commemorate the 40th anniversary of the miners’ strike.

Music played by the Pit-tington brass band included the miners’ hymn *Gresford* and there were two strong speeches by Stephen Guy, Chair of the Durham Miners’ Association, and Alan Mardghum, Secretary of the Durham Miners’ Association.

Strike: An Uncivil War

We praised the documentary *Strike: An Uncivil War* in the last issue of *MediaNorth*. We’re delighted that this important film, which tells the powerful story of the year-long miners’ strike, is now available to watch on Netflix. **MN**

Al Jazeera closure silences journalists

At 4am on Sunday 22 September, Israeli soldiers raided Al Jazeera’s office in Ramallah – ignoring that it is in an area under Palestinian control – and delivered an order closing it for 45 days.

The office was important because it was able to report on Israel’s violations in Palestinian territory.

The raid, captured on live TV, showed Israeli troops handing an Israeli military court order to Al Jazeera’s bureau chief, Walid al-Omari, informing him of the closure. Al-Omari later said the

court order accused Al Jazeera of ‘incitement to and support of terrorism’ and that the Israeli soldiers confiscated the bureau’s cameras before leaving.

‘Targeting journalists this way aims to erase the truth and prevent people from hearing the truth,’ he said.

The incident received minimal coverage in the Israeli media. *The Times of Israel* flagged it, inaccurately, as ‘a concerted effort by authorities to crack down on the network, regarded by Israel as propagating inflammatory pro-Hamas rhetoric’.

It looks like the Ramallah of-

fice may also have been closed as a prelude to the massive attacks subsequently launched into Lebanon.

Al Jazeera’s other bureau in Israel was closed in May after the Israeli parliament passed what became known as the ‘Al Jazeera Law’, which allowed the government to shut down, for 45 days at a time, any foreign media that posed a threat to the state. The ‘temporary shutdown’ has been renewed since then and still holds.

Al Jazeera has been providing extensive coverage of Israel’s nearly year-long military offensive in Gaza and the surge in violence against Palestinians in the occupied West Bank.

Although Israel claims it does not target journalists, four Al Jazeera staff are among the 174 journalists killed since the Gaza war began last October, and the network’s office in the besieged territory has been bombed. Al Jazeera also rejects the accusations that it harmed Israel’s security as a ‘dangerous and ridiculous lie’ that puts its journalists at risk. **MN**

- If you would like to receive future copies of the online version of *MediaNorth* contact us at cpbfnorth@outlook.com
- *MediaNorth* is published quarterly, and we welcome comments or suggestions for articles.
- Become a friend on Facebook at: Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom North
- Twitter: @campaign_and
- Website: www.medianorth.org.uk