

## Hillsborough Tragedy

# Truth, lies and a 28-year search for justice

There's nothing new about 'fake news,' writes **Granville Williams**, who recalls the infamous lies that led to a long-lasting boycott of Britain's biggest-selling paper

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Twenty-eight years after the Hillsborough football disaster at the English FA Cup semi final match between Liverpool and Nottingham Forest at Sheffield on Saturday, April 15 1989, there's a chance that justice may finally be in sight for the determined families of the 96 dead and the survivors from that day. The key question is, Why has it taken so long?

We hear a lot these days about "fake news" and "post-truth politics," but media coverage of the disaster plumbed new depths. The focus for people's anger was, and remains, the infamous Sun newspaper's front-page (opposite), published four days after the tragedy, headlined THE TRUTH. But the Sun was not alone in its misconduct; the media overall played a dire role in disseminating gross untruths. The disaster, unlike

many others, was comprehensively recorded live in front of a TV audience and by sports photographers present for the match.

The sheer scale of the tragedy attracted massive media coverage with reporters, photographers and camera crews converging on both Sheffield and Liverpool. The result was that the Sunday and Monday papers published close-up photos of Liverpool supporters either trapped, injured or dead behind the wire, graphically showing their terror and torture.



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Left: The Sun's infamous front page, which resulted in a 28-year boycott of the newspaper in Liverpool.

Above: The Mirror's appalling coverage showed grisly pictures of dying and injured fans

The official death list had not been published so the papers had no way of knowing whether the individuals pictured were alive or dead. Robert Maxwell's Mirror had recently moved to full-colour and carried 16 pages on the story, filling the front page with a grisly picture of fans who appeared dead or dying, jumbled together on top of each other, and showing blue asphyxiated faces.

I intended to buy all the newspapers that Monday to monitor coverage, but I was so appalled by the Mirror that I could not buy it.

What was startling about the coverage in most national and regional newspapers was the certainty about who caused the disaster: the guilt was firmly placed on Liverpool fans. This coverage shaped public perceptions of the disaster for years. We know now that the South Yorkshire Police (SYP) match com-

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Above: Even the supposedly up-market newspapers published the lies about how drunken Liverpool supporters were responsible for the events leading up to the deaths of 96 supporters.

mander, Chief Superintendent David Duckenfield, had lied to senior officials when he said Liverpool fans had forced their way into the stadium and rushed into the central pens, thereby causing the fatal crush. It was 26 years later when he appeared at the Warrington inquest into Hillsborough in March 2015, when he finally admitted that he had ordered Gate C to be opened.

SYP disseminated a distorted, emotive and sensational version of events that shaped media reporting, and excluded any alternative explanations for the disaster. The key to this was White's News Agency, the Sheffield company which circulated the SYP allegations. Their reports were based on meetings over three days between agency staff and SYP officers, and interviews with Irvine Patnick MP, and the South Yorkshire Police Federation Secretary, Paul Middup. On the day the controversial Sun front page was published, Middup told Police Federation members that "putting our side of the story over to the press and media" had been his priority.

The seamless narrative fitted every prejudice about drunken Liverpool supporters, violent and ticketless, causing mayhem and death. It took the Hillsborough Independent Panel report of September 2012 to totally demolish that web of lies.

The pictures and reports in newspapers

triggered revulsion; the Press Council was flooded with complaints and set up an inquiry. Newspapers, too, were deluged with angry callers and letters. For Liverpool's bereaved families, however, the pain and anguish of such exposure was indescribable. The next wave of horror for Liverpool was the invasion by journalists tasked with the grisly job of getting pictures of the dead and tear-jerking stories from their parents, relatives and friends. Then, to add to it all, the massive media intrusion into private grief continued at funerals as the bereaved families buried their dead.

It was outrage at this state of affairs that prompted the Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom (CPBF) to organise a public meeting in the iconic Bluecoats building in Liverpool, where the speakers were Eamon McCabe, picture editor of the Guardian, Steve Kelly, a former Granada producer and author of the official history of Liverpool FC, and Rogan Taylor of the Football Supporters' Association.

Steve Kelly told how, "A week after Hillsborough I was telephoned by the producer of a leading BBC current affairs programme. 'Would I like two days' work?' They wanted someone to go and knock on the doors of

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the bereaved and ask if they could film the funerals and do some interviews. They had a list of a dozen names and addresses but weren't sure who had been buried. In other words, I might knock on a door of a bereaved family who had already buried its dead. They did not wish to tap my knowledge of football but wanted instead to use my credibility. They knew that the reputations of journalists were at an all-time low, but with my association with Liverpool FC, I might have been able to get access where they would be refused."

Eamonn McCabe slated the cruel and insensitive use of close-up pictures in many of the tabloids, while Rogan Taylor attacked the way the coverage of the disaster demonised football fans, particularly those who supported Liverpool. From the audience, Brian Brierley argued for a boycott of the Sun in Liverpool, one which has been in place ever since.

But the key issue highlighted was how powerless people felt in challenging the lies being printed about Liverpool supporters and preventing the gross intrusion into people's grief. The tabloids seemed to be able to act with impunity in the absence of effective press regulation. On that front not much has changed, but on January 12, 2017, the Inde-

pendent Police Complaints Commission (IPCC) and Operation Resolve jointly referred files of evidence to the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS). Fifteens file relate to Operation Resolve's investigation, and the potential offences include gross negligence, manslaughter, perverting the course of justice, misconduct in public office and offences under the Safety of Sports Ground Act 1975 and Health and Safety at Work legislation.

Eight relate to the IPCC's independent investigation into both South Yorkshire Police and West Midlands Police and the alleged cover-up of the disaster. Potential offences include perverting the course of justice, conspiracy to pervert the course of justice and misconduct in public office.

The day after its infamous front page, the Sun carried another front page opinion piece, "The Truth Hurts." But not as much as the lies the paper relentlessly peddled under its foul-mouthed, bullying editor, Kelvin MacKenzie.

Now, perhaps, there is the prospect of justice for the incredibly brave and determined Hillsborough families after their 28-year battle against media lies.

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**Granville Williams** is a member of the National Council of the Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom. His most recent book is *The Flame Still Burns: The Creative Power of Coal*. You can find information on how to join the CPBF at [www.cpb.org.uk](http://www.cpb.org.uk)

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