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SKY TAKEOVER

THEIR OWN WORST ENEMY

DESPERATE MEASURES are being taken by the Murdoch media companies to shore up the bid to buy up Sky TV.

Culture secretary Karen Bradley was expected to announce that she will refer the bid to the Competition and Markets Authority as Free Press went to the printer. In July she said she was "minded" to do so after a report from the media regulator Ofcom that it would hand the Murdochs too much control over UK media and threaten their diversity.

The threats to the deal are all of the Murdochs' own making – from the abuse of their media power, from legal actions over the phone-hacking and illegal information gathering at the London papers, from political reactions to their racism and Islamophobia, from the sexual harassment scandals at Fox TV, its crude right-wing propaganda and fake stories ...

All of these were exacerbated over the summer as Karen Bradley was making up her mind:

- News Group, the London newspapers subsidiary, paid out undisclosed millions in September to settle 17 court cases over phone-hacking at the Sun
- 21st Century Fox, the film and TV arm, withdrew Fox News from broadcasting in the UK after its breaches of broadcasting regulations
- More than 100 MPs signed a furious cross-party letter to the editor of the Sun demanding he sack former political editor Trevor

Kavanagh over an article that asked "What will we do about The Muslim Problem?"

■ 178 people lodged formal complaints about a story in The Times falsely accusing a London council of forcing a Christian child into a Muslim foster family

■ A group of peers demanded action over the potential abuse of data about Sky subscribers by the Murdoch group

■ A columnist on the Sunday Times in Ireland, Kevin Myers, was sacked over a stupidly anti-semitic article.

After publication of Trevor Kavanagh's piece The National Union of Journalists demanded that the press self-regulator IPSO carry

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out an immediate investigation into the prevalence of Islamophobia, racism and hatred in the press.

He raised similar outrage last year by his support for an attack by former Sun editor Kelvin MacKenzie on Channel 4 journalist Fatima Manji for wearing a headscarf while presenting news about a terror attack in France. Fatima Manji complained to the IPSO which, unsurprisingly, threw out her complaint.

Kavanagh then wrote an article

THE MURDOCHS suffered a setback on September 12 when culture secretary Karen Bradley told Parliament the Sky bid will be referred to the competition regulator. Its investigation will take at least six months.

saying she had "made a fool of herself", since wearing a headscarf was a "provocative gesture. She knew precisely what she was doing," he wrote.

Kavanagh is a member of IPSO's board and a cross-party group of MPs and peers wrote to IPSO to express "great concern" at his comments in that role.

Earlier this year MacKenzie himself, for many years one of Rupert Murdoch's closest colleagues, had to be sacked over an article criticising mixed-race footballer Ross Barkley over his appearance.

In Ireland, Kevin Myers was sacked for an article commenting on the publication of the high salaries paid to some BBC presenters, in which he observed that the two highest-paid women on the list, Claudia Winkelman and Vanessa Feltz, were Jewish.

Under the headline "Sorry ladies, equal pay has to be earned", he wrote: "Good for them. Jews are not generally noted for their insistence on selling their talent for the lowest possible price, which is the most useful measure there is of inveterate, lost-with-all-hands stupidity."

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For all campaign news and info go to cpbf.org.uk
Email: freepress@cpbf.org.uk

FOX NEWS SCRAPPED IN UK, PHONE-HACK TRIALS ARE BOUGHT OUT, TO SAVE SKY BID

Panic stations!

IN A DESPERATE move, Rupert Murdoch's 21st Century Fox Corporation has taken its US channel Fox News off the air in the UK after 15 years. The station, with its rabid right-wing politics, its fake news stories and its stream of sex abuse cases, had become a liability in the Murdoch family's pursuit of Sky TV.

The decision came as Karen Bradley (*below*), the culture secretary, was about to announce her decision – expected as Free Press went to the printer – on whether to ask the Competition and Markets Authority to launch an investigation into the Murdochs' £11.7 billion takeover bid.

In July she said she was

"minded" to do so but needed more information from the regulator Ofcom which examined the bid in the early summer.

Fox News, though licensed to broadcast by Ofcom, had a tiny UK audience of about 2,000 viewers a day. Yet it managed to attract a disproportionate number of complaints and Ofcom had made a number of rulings over breaches of the licence conditions, including four last year, one of them being over a programme featuring a claim that Birmingham was a Muslim-dominated city "where non-Muslims simply don't go".

The company said it had "concluded that it is not in our

commercial interest to continue providing Fox News in the UK".

Ed Miliband, the former Labour leader and a prominent campaigner against the bid succeeding, said: "This decision shows the Murdochs panicking about their bid for Sky.

"It amounts to an admission that Fox News is not fit for UK broadcasting in the standards and ethics of its journalism.

"It's yet more proof that the Murdochs can't be trusted to own 100% of Sky.

"Quite simply, the fear of the Murdochs is that the scandals at Fox News could in 2017 sink their bid for Sky, just as the scandals at the News of the World did in 2011."



'Stop those cases now!'

RUPERT MURDOCH has paid out millions and will have to pay out more to prevent court hearings that could scupper his bid for Sky.

In September his News Group newspaper company settled 17 cases over phone-hacking and illegally obtaining personal information by journalists at the Sun.

The case was due to come to the High Court in October, when evidence would have been heard relating not just to phone-hacking at the daily paper, which has never been admitted, but also to his son James Murdoch's role in the huge cover-up that followed the hacking scandal at the News of the World.

At a hearing in June, News Group was ordered to explain why it had redacted hundreds of documents relevant to the hacking case, and that laptops used by James Murdoch should be searched for documents relating to the deletion of millions of allegedly incriminating emails.

If this information came out before the bid for Sky was sealed it would add to the problems the Murdochs have created for themselves through the brutal management of their media businesses.

The 17 cases involve minor celebrities whose lives would be of no interest were it not for

the Murdoch papers' prurient news values.

The highest-profile are comedian Les Dennis, the footballer Jonathan Woodgate, a former press officer for Liverpool football club and three Coronation Street actors. The cost of the settlement has not been disclosed.

But there are another 74 claims against the Sun in waiting which will no doubt have to be bought out as well. A court hearing for the next tranche is scheduled for January 2018.

News Group has already settled hacking cases with more than 1,000 people, but these were related to the News of the World.

WRONG HANDS TO HOLD ALL THAT DATA

A TAKEOVER of Sky TV by the Murdoch empire would be a "very grave threat to our democratic process" according to a group of peers concerned about the abuse of the data held by the pay-TV group on its subscribers.

The six members of the House of Lords describe it as "one of the largest and most sophisticated datasets in the country", containing the TV viewing, internet and phone records of 13 million households.

The data could be misused for political purposes should it "fall into the hands of an owner with an appetite for political leverage."

The organiser of the group, film producer Lord Puttnam (*above*), said: "The deal would give unregulated access to this huge database from which an enormous amount of insight could be extracted.

"With that information, people can be individually targeted with advertisements personalised to them. I do see this as a very grave threat to our democratic process.

"It is incredible this hasn't been considered at any point.

"There is an urgent need for the Information Commissioner to confirm that data cannot be misused or misapplied before a Sky decision is made."



'What will we do about the Murdoch problem?'

MORE THAN 100 MPs have signed an open letter demanding action over an article in the Sun using "Nazi-like language" about the Muslim community in Britain. The MPs from Labour, Conservative, Liberal Democrat and the Green parties say they "were truly outraged by the hate and bigotry" in a column by the paper's former political editor Trevor Kavanagh.

In the article he said Islam was the cause of an "unspoken fear" that had been suppressed by political correctness and concluded: "What will we do about The Muslim Problem?"

The letter to Sun editor Tony Gallagher called on him to retract the article and consider sacking Trevor Kavanagh: "We implore you to ... strongly consider whether Mr Kavanagh's brand of bigotry fits with your vision for the paper".

It said: "It is shocking that in the 21st century a columnist is using such Nazi-like terminology about a minority community ...

Muslims currently face threats from far right and neo-Nazi groups in the UK and your publication of this article can therefore only be seen as an attempt to further stoke up hatred and hostility against Muslims."

The letter was organised by Labour MP Naz Shah and was signed by 107 MPs including past or present frontbenchers from both main parties.

They also included Sarah Champion, MP for Rotherham and the former shadow minister for equality, who had herself written an article for the Sun about the sickening wave of child sex abuse cases in her constituency. She wrote: "Britain has a problem with British Pakistani men raping and exploiting white girls".

Kavanagh used this article as a pretext for his attack on Islam, arguing that it had broken a taboo imposed by political correctness. Champion was then forced to resign from the Labour front bench. Party leader Jeremy Corbyn said: "We are not going to

blame any particular group or demonise any particular group."

Equality and Human Rights Commission chief executive Rebecca Hilsenrath said it was "a real shame that a respected advocate of equality has felt the need to step down due to an over-sensitivity about language." The press self-regulator IPSO said it had received 150 complaints about Kavanagh's article. They included one submitted jointly by a group of Jewish and Muslim organisations.

Trevor Kavanagh called the letter "a concocted explosion of Labour and Islamic hysteria ... fake fury from Labour lefties dragged by the Muslim Council of Britain."

He said: "This fake outrage is more than simply a personal attack on me or upon the Sun newspaper. It is a pernicious attempt to stifle and smother free speech. The letter is nothing less than an attempt to gag not just me but anyone else who dares to venture an opinion which contradicts their narrow point of view."

Two prejudices in one

Julian Petley tells of a disturbing story where the facts were not allowed to get in the way



According to "confidential local authority reports" allegedly seen by the paper (but not by anyone else), a "social services supervisor" described the child as sobbing and begging not to be returned to the foster carer's home because "they don't speak English".

A predictable media and political storm ensued, given further impetus by the Daily Mail putting the story on its front page under the headline "MPs' Anger as Christian girl forced into Muslim foster care". This used a generic picture of a Muslim family (right) onto which a veil had been photo-shopped over the woman's head.

What emerged from a Family Court hearing the next day told a different story:

- The child had been removed from her mother by the police (not the council) for her own safety. There were suggestions that the mother had drug and alcohol problems.
- The child herself was of Muslim heritage.
- Two weeks before The Times published its story, the local authority had agreed to place the child, with her mother's agreement,

ON AUGUST 28 The Times ran a front page article by Andrew Norfolk, its chief reporter, who last year won awards for exposing the Rotherham child abuse scandal. Headed "Christian child forced into Muslim foster care", the story alleged that a white, English-speaking, Christian child had been taken from her family by "the scandal-ridden borough of Tower Hamlets" and forced to live with two Muslim households.

In one of these, the paper said, the foster mother wore a niqab, removed a cross from the child's neck, suggested she learn Arabic and refused to let her eat her favourite meal, spaghetti carbonara, because it contained bacon. The five-year-old is said to have told her mother that "Christmas and Easter are stupid" and that "European women are stupid and alcoholic".

with her maternal grandmother, who is a Muslim. A court-appointed guardian had spoken to the child alone and reported that she was settled and well cared for.

But the opportunity to run a story that banged both the "loony left council" and the Islamophobia drums simultaneously was too tempting to let other considerations stand in the way. Never mind that the reporting, which included pictures of the child, albeit anonymised, threatened to reveal her identity. Never mind that the supposed "facts" of the story don't stand up to scrutiny. And never mind that its publication gave racists and Islamophobes a platform from which to bellow their repellent views.



The Times produced further distortions to milk the story for all its ideological worth. On August 30 it ran the headline "Judge rules child must leave foster home: The Times praised for exposing council's failure", giving the distinct impression that the paper was responsible for the girl being moved to her grandmother, although this had happened two weeks before the story appeared.

It reported the judge in the case as saying that the paper had raised "very concerning" matters of "legitimate public interest". But the judge didn't say the stories were true. Nor could she have praised the paper for exposing the council's failure, since the Family Court documents present no evidence of any "failure".

Indeed, what is really "very concerning ... and a matter of legitimate public interest" is why The Times ran such a highly flammable story and other papers immediately followed suit.

There have been 178 complaints to IPSO over this story. IPSO does have the power to conduct an investigation, but whether it would be willing to do so is highly doubtful.

The sites of London



Alan Slingsby took part in a get-together of alternative news media in the capital and reports that there is plenty going on

FROM A HYPERLOCAL blog run by a solicitor in his spare time to a long-established London weekly employing 20 people, publications represented at a London community media summit in June were as diverse as the city itself.

Speakers from printed papers and magazines, blogs and community radio explained their successes and crises and discussed finances and government policy in question-and-answer sessions with an audience of about 50 community journalists.

The idea for the conference came when Howard Sharman of the not-for-profit management consultancy Eastside Primitimers and David Floyd and Anna Merryfield of the social enterprise Social Spider CIC, were discussing



Emma Meese: representative body

the rise of hyperlocal community newspapers, websites and radio stations. Realising there was not yet a forum for the 40-plus community publishers operating inside the M25, they organised the London Community Media Summit with help from Cardiff University's Centre for Community Journalism.

Introducing the event, Howard Sharman spoke of the "scorched earth" policy of local commercial publishers who were moving reporting and production of what remained of local media away from the areas it purported to cover.

The Cardiff University centre's Emma Meese said it was committed to providing training, research, networking and advice to hyperlocal publishers and had recently opened the Independent Community News Network – a representative body for such publishers, run by the centre.

It is working on legal advice for hyperlocal publishers and is examining the potential for collective advertisement sales.

Meese said the network was working with the BBC to ensure that its "local democracy reporter" scheme considers community publications.

The centre is also working with the National Union of Journalists to secure press cards for community and hyperlocal publishers.

Community media speakers came from the Camden New Journal, Waltham Forest Echo, Brixton Bugle, Hackney Citizen, Bristol Cable and the Community Media Association.

Veteran journalist Eric Gordon, publisher of the Camden New Journal, which grew out of an NUJ strike paper in 1982 and is now an independent weekly, explained the mechanics, finances and ethics of the publication.

Alec Saelens, co-founder of the Bristol Cable, which combines a quarterly magazine with a 30,000 print order and an online presence in the city, explained its membership model which has 1,700 supporters paying an average of £2.50 a month.

The Cable's success in winning grants for its work – including £80,000 over two years from a Chicago-based foundation – attracted keen interest.

Funding dominated discussions, with advertising, sponsorship, crowdfunding, community shareholders and grants all examined – as well as the question of what a community-funded publication would do if it came upon a story that would upset its funders.



PICTURES: BRIXTON MEDIA

Rachel Knight (right) of the media regulator IMPRESS was one of several participants from interested organisations, including the CPBF, at the conference

'PAPERS WOULD HAVE PICKED UP GRENFELL TOWER CONCERN'

THE FIRE at the Grenfell Tower in west London (right) that killed more than 80 people in June might not have happened but for the cutbacks in the local press, according to a local journalist.

Grant Feller worked on the Kensington and Chelsea News 30 years ago and says the fire safety concerns of Grenfell Tower residents would definitely have found a voice.

But in July the paper closed when current owners Capital Media Newspapers went into administration.

There is now no newspaper in the borough. Before it



folded the News had just one reporter, who also had to cover other London boroughs.

When Feller began his career in 1990 there was an editorial team of ten, plus competition from a rival paper, the Kensington and Chelsea Times.

He says: "One hundred per cent we would have picked up on that story. We would have known about that local group's concerns because we were very much in the local community.

"We would have pored over the council meeting agendas and asked questions of the councillors and the officers. But today there is no-one there."

Feller, who still works as a freelance in Chiswick, wrote stories himself about the living conditions in Grenfell Tower.

He says: "It was dilapidated, had really bad wiring and

was a horrible place to live. I remember writing stories about it many times."

The collapse of Capital Media Newspapers meant the demise of four weekly titles, including those in the neighbouring areas of Fulham, Hammersmith and Shepherd's Bush.

At the same time in July three more London papers closed: the Enfield Advertiser, Haringey Advertiser and Barnet Press owned by Tindle Newspapers.

Nationally, 18 weekly newspapers closed over the summer, according to the Press Gazette website.



David Altheer on the prowl for stories in Dalston's famous Ridley Road street market

I do it myself

After quitting Fleet Street, veteran journalist **David Altheer** started a minimal-budget website to meet a need for news in a busy London borough

“ WHEN I SET UP a news site I turned my life around. Having taken redundancy a decade ago from a national newspaper in my late middle age I did what I should have done when I was young: start my own publication.

I'd found many excuses not to do that: lack of funding, business inexperience, the anti-entrepreneurialism of the hippie 1960s. The internet invalidated those excuses. No print bills, little or no staff needed, access to advertising provided by Google and others ... and you could absorb rental costs by working from home.

Living in an area as newsy as Hackney, there was a plethora of stories missed by the local paper, partly because its office is many kilometres away. For years I used to tip off the reporters, without ever being offered the tiniest fee. Now I could write and publish those stories myself.

I dubbed my online paper Loving Dalston, in the belief that my district of Hackney was attracting highly educated hipsters eager to give the area a makeover.

I was right: slowly, people began contacting the site, asking me to investigate crooked landlords, council malpractice, NHS scandals and other alleged wrongs. The stories did not always stand up, but clearly I was fulfilling a need, if only in a small way.

Numbers? I rarely check Google statistics because I know my site's following will be far smaller than that of well-resourced news sites

such as Vice – after all, Rupert Murdoch helps to fund that one – but I do like to see if any trends show, what stories push up the readership graph.

Timing is crucial and, if wrong, can reduce a story's rating, as happened with one on the teenage violence simmering on the streets of Dalston. School holidays were starting, giving the lost boys and girls, as they are sometimes known, more time to annoy local shops and cafés.

When I asked the police what they were doing about the problem, I was invited to go on walkabout with them. I ran the story under the headline “How Hackney police are taking on the lost boys and girls etc...”, a little nervous that my leftist readers might think I'd sold out to the authorities. Well might I worry. I happened to run it the day a young man died in Dalston at the hands of police, which led to a Black Lives Matter protest march to Stoke Newington police station.

The article pushed the story-readership graph only to a so-so level, nowhere as high as others of my stories. The highest so far this year was about a celebrity visitor to Hackney being told to buzz off by a bystander.

The fact that it was my former employer Rupert Murdoch, descending on the area with his wife Jerry Hall for the premiere of her new film at a local arthouse cinema, was just annoying: you spend all that time on a serious story like the lost teenagers of Hackney and what story goes around the world? A bagatelle about a multibillionaire and his ex-model wife.

That's journalism for you.



AT LAST THE MEDIA FUND

THOMAS BARLOW introduces a new programme to raise funds to help much-needed new local media

FROM OCTOBER 1 supporters of independent media will be able to back new ventures through the Media Fund.

The project began in 2015 when the group Real Media hosted a conference in Manchester to discuss challenges facing the media. Funding was the topic on everyone's lips. How do we fund quality media as old revenue models collapse?

Organisers realised that, together, we could work to tackle the problem. After a year of planning they were ready to start a fundraising organisation. By December 2016 the Media Fund had raised £10,000.

They launched a temporary website to show how it could function and started producing governance documents and investment guidelines, bringing together 21 media organisations.

The Media Fund will help raise money for organisations meeting three key criteria – that they:

- are not solely reliant on corporate or state funding
- abide by the NUJ code of conduct
- unionise within a year of joining the fund.

Other rules will be implemented after the organisation's first AGM on December 1.

There are two key ways that the fund plans raise cash for such organisations.

First, it will make it easy for individual donors to donate via the website, producing lots of videos, memes, articles



and podcasts to encourage people to put their hands in their pockets.

Second, The Media Fund will approach big donors like co-ops, trade unions, NGOs and high net worth individuals and encourage them too to dip into their pockets.

For more information you can contact them at admin@themediainfund.org or @themediainfund on Twitter, and they can be found on iTunes, Facebook, Medium and at themediainfund.org

■ **Why the launch on October 1?** Perhaps unexpectedly, to coincide with the Tory Party Conference, where The Media Fund will be supporting a counter-conference livestream with The People's Assembly.

Myths of time



Tim Gopsill welcomes a book that challenges the claims made for and against the BBC and takes a hard look at the reality

IT'S THE question that vexes supporters of public broadcasting when they are called on yet again to defend the BBC from its enemies right and left: why does it have to be so bloody right wing?

Whenever we rally to the BBC's side as it comes under attack in the press, we are defending not what it is but what we want it to be; independent, popular, progressive and publicly accountable.

We all understand the BBC is a component of the British establishment, so you might expect that it will seek generally to express majority taste and opinion. But while politics are currently veering sharply away from the centre-right neo-liberal metropolitan consensus, the BBC seems to be unable to respond.

It is stuck with the discredited notion that responsiveness to grass-roots opinion is to indulge xenophobia and put Nigel Farage on every programme. Its antagonism to radical left-wing and community politics looks unshakable. Yet it enjoys a constitutional independence, founded in its funding through the licence fee,

which is like a share in a company, making you and I its owners. The fee is not a general tax, yet the BBC has always been subject to government and Parliament; it has never initiated nor been subjected to any process to give this notional ownership any kind of reality, so what we want to know is, why not? And why can't it make better use of its independence?

There's some help towards working this out in a new book from Tom Mills: *The BBC, Myth of a Public Service*, which goes right back to the corporation's origins and its intimate relationship with the British state of the 1920s and '30s, embattled with militant trade unions, communism and European fascism.

The book offers a much-needed lesson for public broadcasting supporters and media reformers because it dismantles the contrasting myths that make these discussions so convoluted.

The first dominant myth portrays the BBC's liberalism as radically left-wing, unpatriotic and corrosive of traditional British values, whatever those might be. This is such nonsense that not even its feverish protagonists in the right-wing press actually believe it (do they believe anything?). Just like the left, they portray the BBC as what they would like it to be, as something they can denigrate and destabilise for their own commercial reasons.

There is an associated myth propagated by governments in wartime, which inevitably attack

the BBC's reporting as antagonistic, even when it is has been shown by researchers to be more slavishly loyal than other media. The reason again is to create a convenient impression, in this case that the hapless BBC's bulletins are critically independent, to make them appear more credible to the public than the propaganda they really are.

The BBC's reporting, especially on security-related matters, has been lurching rightwards since the great trauma it suffered over such an episode in 2004 – the Today programme's story on the government's justification for the invasion of Iraq the previous year. Defence correspondent Andrew Gilligan's report led to the suspicious suicide of his source, weapons expert David Kelly; to a rigged judge-led inquiry that slammed the reporting; and to the utter capitulation of the BBC, which sacked not just Gilligan but the Director-General Greg Dyke.

Mills writes that the "conventional take on the affair", that the BBC "defied government pressure and insisted on critically scrutinizing the case for invading Iraq ... is a serious misreading of what actually happened." The affair, he writes, "illustrates the Corporation's embeddedness within the British state."

In a way it was even worse than that: in the aftermath the BBC committed itself against any such critical reporting, establishing elaborate procedures to prevent it. It was not just the executives who set this direction, but BBC journalists who refused to back Gilligan, whose

NEWS: A DUTY TO CONCEAL

THE VETTING of staff to weed out subversives was a standard BBC practice until its cover was blown in 1985, but it can still censor workers' voices in the news.

Footage of a demonstration outside a court in July was edited to conceal slogans on placards.

The case in court was the prosecution of contractors on the Crossrail site in London where a worker Rene Tkáčik had been killed. Crossrail was fined £1 million.

Demonstrators from the Construction Safety Campaign carried a placard saying "BFK CROSSRAIL KILL MAIM BLACKLIST", referring to the death, further accidents causing injury, and the blacklisting of union reps.

One wore a T-shirt with the word "blacklisted" on it.

Both were blacked out between two BBC London Regional TV bulletins at 1.30pm and 6.30pm on July 28.

MICK HOLDER



Now you see it ... the slogans, above, and, below, how the BBC showed them



supposedly irresponsible and unprofessional work was widely criticised.

This deference to the security state is identified by Mills as an essential restraint on the BBC's independence, illustrated perfectly by its collaboration with MI5 in the vetting of its staff. There was a scandal when the practice was exposed in the Observer in 1985, and another myth, or at least a misapprehension, arose that the spooks had required the BBC to co-operate.

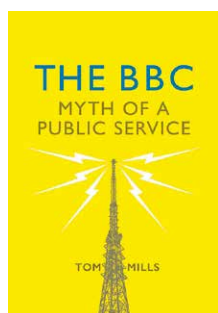
Mills covers this matter at length and shows that the corporation had pushed for the vetting, and for it to be applied to a lot more staff than MI5 wanted to handle, including technicians as well as broadcasters and writers. There were two apparent concerns, one that subversives might sabotage the transmitters, the other that BBC bosses wanted to be able to demonstrate to government that its output was safe from undesirable influences. MI5 officers' evident disdain for this motive provides some of the lighter moments in the book.

Another area explored by Mills is the BBC's coverage of business and economics. It is less familiar territory than the warmongering but equally instructive to read how quickly it absorbed Thatcherite monetarism and began importing right-wing business journalists. The former left-wing Labour minister Tony Benn loved to point out the brainwashing value of routinely ending news bulletins with announcements of stock market indices and currency rates which is of no real interest to anybody, since financiers know anyway.

The second dominant myth about the BBC, held by the liberal left, is the one that upholds it as the model to the world of defiantly principled, honest and independent public broadcasting. Particularly vaunted is the World Service, a directly government-funded radio station routinely described by ministers as "an instrument of soft power" for Britain.

Strangely, this myth is more dangerous than the right-wing myths because its adherents genuinely believe it. They are led by BBC luvvie Jean Seaton, professor of media history at Westminster University and the BBC's current official historian; Mills's book is something of an antidote to her Panglossian accounts and he does have some fun at her expense.

■ *THE BBC, Myth Of A Public Service*, Tom Mills, Verso



Tom Mills

Managing the BBC: Ofcom in command



Patricia Holland

explains the rationale behind making the BBC subject

to regulation by Ofcom

IN APRIL this year the BBC came under the formal regulation of Ofcom, with Britain's communications regulator taking the role of the now abolished BBC Trust.

It seemed an incongruous step: a venerable broadcaster, which has been at the centre of British civic life since the 1920s and has made a massive contribution to the standards and practices that have sustained British broadcasting, is now "held to account" by an upstart regulatory body set up in 2003 with a stated aim to deregulate broadcasting content and concern itself with issues of competition.

Despite its deregulatory approach, Ofcom was to be consigned to David Cameron's promised "bonfire of the quangos" in the run-up to the 2010 general election; in the event it survived to be granted this wider remit, to "hold the BBC to account for fulfilling its mission and promoting its public purposes", across television, radio and online.

Ofcom is organising a consultation on how to regulate the BBC's performance. The aim is to produce an operating licence with "enforceable regulatory conditions", and many pages of detailed requirements are laid out to this end.

In the run-up to the new arrangement there was much concern that Ofcom would become too powerful. Would it be a back seat driver? Would it duplicate the role of the BBC's Board, or interfere in editorial decision making?

Naturally Ofcom denies such ambitions, yet the consultation document reads like a blueprint for micro-management. There are detailed requirements for quotas, scheduling, commissioning, performance measurements and a great deal of box ticking.

There is a phenomenon called "distinctiveness" which the BBC is required to demonstrate. Its services "should be distinctive from those provided elsewhere", which the document defines as "substantially different to [sic] other comparable providers across each and every UK Public Service both in peak time and

overall". That is, the populist programming of the commercial channels.

This requirement to be distinctive and "substantially different" is an extension of the long-term Conservative project to reduce the scope and popularity of the corporation.

Some people did welcome the involvement of Ofcom as the first independent regulator of the BBC. But its independence may be illusory. Many of the requirements in the consultation document are quoted verbatim from the framework agreement drawn up between the BBC and the government to accompany the new charter.

This agreement is highly prescriptive. Schedule 2 requires Ofcom to "seek to increase the current requirements on the BBC as a whole" and to consider setting requirements in new areas, particularly for genres which are "underprovided or in decline" elsewhere. It seems that to a large extent Ofcom's hands are tied.

Instead the hand of ex-Culture Secretary, John Whittingdale, is clearly visible, pursuing a project which began way back in the 1980s with the infamous Peacock report which aimed to shrink the BBC. Instead of seeking audience appeal and competing with other broadcasters, Peacock insisted, the BBC should stick to worthy public service programmes which would fill in the gaps left by the popular commercial channels, its role being to compensate for "market failure" and leave profitable programming to the profiteers.

As for the commercial public service channels, ever since the 1990 Broadcasting Act, government policies have ensured that television regulators have become progressively deregulatory and "light-touch", allowing ever greater freedom for market priorities. ITV's obligation to create the conditions in which a successful company like Granada could sustain "distinctive" programming itself – a form of regulation which was enabling rather than limiting – has been progressively removed.

Putting Ofcom in charge of the BBC as well as the commercial companies is a golden opportunity for the Tories to pile the public service obligations on the BBC alone and let the companies off.

In 2009 David Cameron also said: "Even when power is delegated to a quango ... the minister will remain responsible for the outcomes. There will be no more hiding behind the cloak of quango independence."

Eight years on, this has more than a ring of truth.

We'll back new local media, says Corbyn

A UK Labour government will examine media ownership, go ahead with Stage 2 of the Leveson Inquiry, and consider ways to support local journalism. These undertakings came from Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn (*right*) in an informal address to members of the National Union of Journalists executive council in July.

He expressed support for the local press, revealing that he had started a career in journalism with the Newport and Market Drayton Advertiser in Shropshire, where he admitted he had been "given what for" by the mother of a bride after errors appeared in a wedding report.

"At their best," he said "local papers are a kind of glue in the community", but he was "concerned that all media operations seem to be stretching news reporting to the umpteenth degree, which means that sometimes reporting isn't terribly good or that journalists themselves are incredibly stretched in just trying to get the news together. I think that is bad news."

The regionalisation of local papers, the centralisation of reporting and the reduction in the number of journalists undermine that any sense of community, he said; that a Labour government would examine the effects of online advertising on newspaper viability. He said he was concerned about "questions of wider media ownership", particularly about the Murdoch bid for Sky.

Media contribute to democracy, he said, adding: "Everybody gets irritated by journalists from time to time, even me, but I do recognise this essential part of a democratic society. The right to know is part of a democratic society as it protecting those who investigate and make sure this is a reality."

On local media financing, Corbyn said co-operative ownership was an option and



CHATHAM HOUSE

that the party was considering introducing a charter for local reporting. Wider takeover proposals – obliging workers to have opportunities for co-operative takeovers – would include newspapers, he said.

He confirmed that Labour is pushing for "Leveson Two" – the extension of an inquiry into press behaviour that was suspended in 2012 and the Conservatives have so far refused to revive.

He also said he supported the BBC and was opposed to using the licence fee to fund other areas of media. "I am very disappointed with the idea that the BBC would offer parts of the BBC income to government or to other areas of the media. If you top-slice the licence fee to send it somewhere else, then obviously the BBC loses out."

Adam Christie

Mirror bids to buy Desmond's Express group

THE ACQUISITIVE Trinity Mirror group is poised to take over Express Newspapers from its unhinged right-wing owner Richard Desmond. The deal will mark a big reduction of media diversity at the UK national paper level.

Talks over sharing back-office functions were broken off when the owner of the national Mirror titles announced it was preparing a complete buyout. No sums have been mentioned but Desmond paid £125 million for the Express titles in 2000 and has always made big profits from selling on media operations after stripping their costs.

Both companies have been savagely cutting back the costs of production for years to maintain high levels of profit.

There has been speculation about a takeover for several years and there were talks in 2015 but Trinity Mirror instead bought regional press group Local World for £220 million. It is the largest regional newspaper publisher in the UK by some margin.

The acquisition, which will need and likely receive regulatory approval from the Competition and Markets Authority, will cover the Daily and Sunday Express titles and the Daily and Sunday Star, plus OK! magazine.

There are concerns over the political differences between the titles, with Mirror backing the Labour Party while the Express group is pro-UKIP. Desmond gave UKIP £1 million for the 2015 election.

The National Union of Journalists said the deal between political opposites "would have implications for media plurality and diversity. We would want a clear understanding of how the editorial independence of the titles will be managed."

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