

# FREE Press

No 213 Winter 2017/18

Journal of the Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom

## MURDOCH AND SKY

# THE DEAL TOO FAR

THE CPBF is launching a £20,000 crowdfunding appeal to step up the battle to stop the Murdochs buying up Sky TV. It is a fight that can now be won, as their empire starts to shake.

Rupert and son James Murdoch have banked for years on the super-lucrative Sky channels in Europe to lift 21st Century Fox to the premier-league level of the US media megacorps.

But after shock corporate moves in November Fox looks more like a seller than a buyer. The vultures are circling over the group, which has been maimed by the delays in the Sky takeover and the increasingly negative prospects for its success.

There is a real chance that these purveyors of so much hatred and lies, and political influence and corruption, over so many years, can be stopped in their tracks.

First it was revealed that film and TV giant Disney had held talks to buy Fox's film and TV operations, including its present 39 per cent stake in Sky. Then it was confirmed that three other communications monsters – Comcast, America's largest cable operator, Verizon, the internet provider group, and Sony, owner of Columbia and CBS – were also in the hunt.

At the same time, the telecoms giant AT&T has agreed terms to take over the top media company Time Warner, which Fox tried unsuccessfully to buy last year. It is expected that the deal, which would put CNN, Warner Brothers and HBO movies in the hands of the world's biggest telecoms group, is expected to be blocked by US regulators.

In this contest of corporate might the Murdochs are looking vulnerable and the outcome of the Sky bid is crucial.

The bid is currently under examination by the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA), which will not report until March and the delay, which has already cost Fox £171 million in compensation to Sky shareholders, is seriously damaging.

**£20,000 TO  
STOP THE  
MURDOCHS**

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If the takeover is not finalised by next August, then the deal is off altogether, with Fox paying out another £200 million.

It is the strength of the opposition campaign that has been able to drag out the regulatory process. The key turning point was when, under pressure, Tory culture secretary Karen Bradley – to the amazement of some, but not the CPBF – asked the CMA to go into the question of the Murdoch's likely commitment to UK broadcasting standards.

The media regulator Ofcom had proposed an inquiry only on the question of media plurality. The CPBF was among the campaigners pressing for the wider inquiry, which opens up all the questions about the "Foxification" of news and the "corporate governance" of the group.

This covers the scandals of phone hacking and corruption on the Murdoch papers in London and serial sexual harassment at Fox in the US.

At a meeting of "civil society" groups with the CMA in October the CPBF led the presentations on the broadcast standards questions.

The £20,000 to be raised by the crowdfunding appeal will pay for further campaign materials but be largely devoted to paying a campaign worker to do the job. A new *Stop Murdoch!* video has been made to boost the appeal.



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**Go to [www.cpbfb.org.uk/stopmurdoch](http://www.cpbfb.org.uk/stopmurdoch)**

**For all campaign news and  
info go to [cpbfb.org.uk](http://cpbfb.org.uk)  
Email:  
[freepress@cpbfb.org.uk](mailto:freepress@cpbfb.org.uk)**

# Walk the Skwawk

There are dozens of outlets in the new left media (NLM), mostly websites that have mushroomed with the ascent of Corbynism in the Labour Party. **TIM GOPSILL** looks at one of the most challenging of them

IT BREAKS all the rules but it works. Of all the new media brought about by the Corbynist insurgency, the Skwawkbox is having the greatest impact on politics on the ground.

The Skwawkbox is a one-person outfit that grinds axes, pursues vendettas and lashes out at enemies of the Labour Left. But it gets visits running well into the millions – it won't divulge its stats – because it keeps left-wing Labour activists and supporters in the know, and there are a lot of them about. It has news you get nowhere else, with an invariable commitment to the cause.

The owner/editor, Steve Walker, looks an unlikely revolutionary: an affable 52-year-old salesman who runs a mailing business on Merseyside and is pictured in a shiny suit on the company website – a photograph he really doesn't like. The company, Foojit, provides

automated cut-price mailing services to customers that include sections of the NHS.

He appears, as well, to breach the criteria for progressive and accountable media that people like the CPBF are constantly calling for: a sole proprietor business person who funds and runs his blog on whim, employing no-one, but using the voluntary labour of a dozen or so supporters.

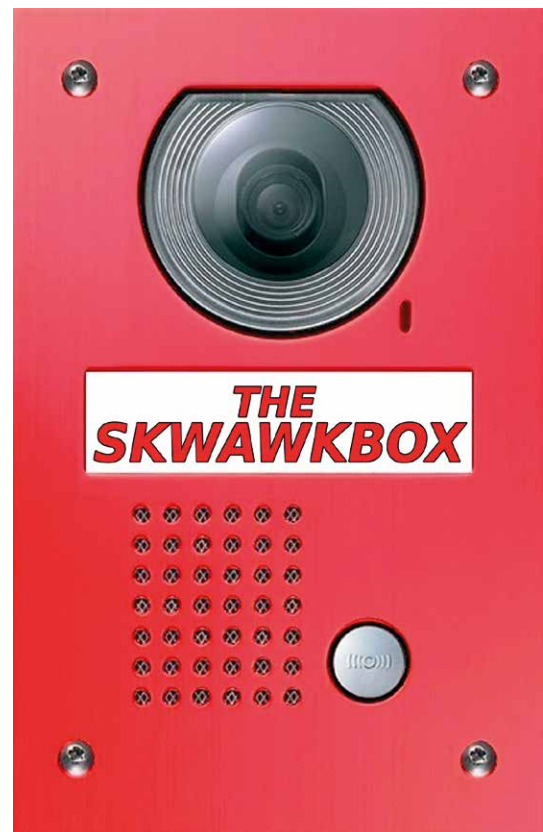
He dishes it out and he takes it. The Skwawkbox arouses a mighty rage on the right wing of the press and the Labour Party alike. It has been attacked in the Sun and the Mail Online, who found out that Steve Walker is not a person to mess with.

The Sun's headline was "Boss of Pro-Corbyn conspiracy website is entrepreneur who cashed in on NHS privatisation". When Steve Walker protested the Sun had to give in. It printed a correction confirming that the mailing software

was provided free of charge and the NHS services concerned were not privatised, then removed the item from its website, which is not something that happens very often.

He complained to IPSO, the tame self-regulator of the corporate press, about the Sun and Mail articles. IPSO rejected the complaints – even the one that the Sun itself conceded!

STEVE WALKER's commitment to the NHS was what started him blogging in the first place. He founded the Skwawkbox – basing the name on his initials, SKW – in 2012 as a local campaign against NHS privatisation. (A "squawk box", by



Steve Walker in business suit on company website

the way, was World War Two military slang for an intercom speaker, if anyone is interested). It was in 2016 that a friend suggested that as a long-term Labour member he should cover the new politics in the party.

The Mail Online had essentially the same story with the addition of an allegation of “spreading fake news”. This was a blunder over the Grenfell Tower death toll, when Steve Walker published a story that “multiple sources told the SKWAWKBOX that the government has placed a ‘D-notice’ on the real number of deaths in the blaze.”

At that stage the official toll was 31 but survivors and emergency workers had seen a hell of a lot more bodies, and in the widespread desperation a paranoid rumour became an accusation from multiple sources.

“That’s what people were saying. They were phoning me,” says Steve Walker. “There was a ban on emergency service workers talking to people and they said it was a D-notice. There was a headmistress who had seen 50 children’s bodies in a school. But I had never heard of D-notices before.”

He phoned the Home Office press officer to find out, and reported: “To say that the question caused consternation at the other end of the line would not be an overstatement. The first comment, in a voice that rose at least half an octave, was ‘Where did you get that information?’”

The story went on: “If it is true that the government has issued a D-notice – and every instinct is screaming that it is – then the government has placed a national security gag on mainstream news editors to prevent them from disclosing what’s already known about the number of lives lost at Grenfell Tower. This raises a huge question: WHY?”

I dare say it would. But every journalist knows that D-notices are not imposed by government – and certainly not the Home Office, whose press officer might well have been bemused – but are agreed by journalists themselves (yes, shamefully) on matters of national security. The story could not have been true. And the death toll, which did go up, could not have been known because of the conditions.

This is not journalism, it is paranoia. When people are in such an awful state of agitation as the Grenfell survivors, all kinds of stories will swirl around. The job of a journalist, you might think, would be to keep a level head.

But Steve Watkins, by his own admission, is not really a journalist. He sees himself rather as the voice of those people, who trust him because he is on their side.

“People come to me with information. I can only use about 10 per cent of the stories I get. They trust me because I use their information fairly and I have never broken promises and use the information in a way they are comfortable with.”

He has built a substantial following. He won’t give stats but says that the Mail Online’s estimate of 500,000 to a million monthly visitors back in June was an underestimate and it has risen considerably since then.

He stoutly defends Labour democracy from attacks from the right. The Sun was aided in its hapless attempt to discredit the Skwawkbox by Labour MP Wes Streeting who said Labour MPs should not talk to it. He said: “I don’t think that Skwawkbox is anything other than a propaganda machine ... Labour MPs certainly shouldn’t lend credibility to the idea that Skwawkbox is a provider of news rather than opinion.”

Steve Walker says: “In some ways it’s nice to be attacked because it means you are attacking the right people.”

Although he is no longer a member of Momentum, with which he says he has “issues over democracy”, anyone in the party associated with the equivalent right-wing groups, Progress and Labour First, are fair game.

So Wes Streeting, he says, “failed to appreciate the irony of talking to a right-wing rag that has more IPSO decisions against it than any other publication” – in other words, that distorts the news to produce the kind of propaganda for which it points the finger at the Skwawkbox.

“Many would consider those publications [the tabloid press] to have a tenuous-at-best relationship with journalism these days. Shoddy journalism and hypocrisy are just what you’d expect from certain publications.”

So you have all sides accusing each other of bad journalistic faith, which is not a bad thing to fight over. The Skwawkbox is not hypocritical but it does conduct itself very much in the style of the popular national press, being outrageous,

inflammatory and generally over-the-top.

The Skwawkbox is regulated by IMPRESS, which is currently considering a complaint over a gloriously tendentious item Walker did in October. Having run the story of the

costly phone calls claimants have to make – up to 55p a minute on some mobiles – to call the DWP, Steve Walker noticed that the HMRC had public phone lines with 0300 numbers, which charge the same as ordinary landline calls.

These lines included the High Net Worth Unit, on which the super-rich can confide their tax anxieties, and the National Yachtline, for individuals who make landfall at UK ports in luxury vessels. These plutocrats might well have phone contracts that grant free landline calls, so the Skwawkbox had a scoop, which wrote itself.

Headlined “Penniless claimants pay 55p a minute. Guess what millionaires pay?” it concluded: “If you’ve got a yacht or pleasure craft and you want a bit of help from HMRC on any potential tax issues, you can call free of charge. But if you’ve got nothing, in many cases literally nothing, well, it only stands to reason that you should rack up a £5.50 bill for every ten minutes you sit listening to infuriating music in the long, long queue ...”

This is inspired tabloid journalism, loaded with class propaganda, just like the Sun and the Mail. It tackles Big Media smears against the left head on, in their own language.

The differences are that the Skwawkbox’s stories come from ordinary people rather than the mouthpieces of corporate or political power; and that they are thereby more honest, and more believable.

## CORPORATE PRESS BOSSES ARE SHAMED AS THEIR ‘HOPELESS’ CASE CRASHES

**THE OWNERS of Britain’s corporate press have been humiliated by the collapse of a legal challenge to the legitimacy of the independent press regulator IMPRESS.**

**The News Media Association (NMA), which represents newspaper owners, launched a High Court case against the Press Recognition Panel’s decision last year to endorse IMPRESS as a regulator within the conditions set by the Leveson report of 2012.**

**In October the court rejected the case “in its entirety”. The judges said the NMA’s claim rested on a fallacy. It described some of the NMA’s arguments as “unattractive” and “hopeless”. It found that the Charter does not require a particular proportion of the news publishing industry to sign up to a regulator in order for it to be recognised.**

**TRUST IN JOURNALISM** 

**The NMA had made this claim because IMPRESS has signed up far fewer and smaller publications than the press’s tame regulator IPSO; but IPSO has not been recognised by the PRP, because it refuses to meet Leveson’s conditions so has not applied for recognition.**

**IMPRESS currently regulates 76 publications. Most are smaller local publications but there are a number of national news websites.**

**The NMA also argued that the IMPRESS board lacked impartiality. Dismissing that, the judges said: “In our view the PRP’s function is not to appoint, or approve appointment of, members of the board. That is for the appointment panel.”**

**The court ordered the NMA to pay IMPRESS’s costs.**

**The Chair of IMPRESS, Walter Merricks, said: “This judgment shows that the system of externally verified self-regulation, recommended by Sir Brian Leveson, is fully functional. We can now get on with the important job of upholding high standards of journalism.”**

**The stories come from ordinary people rather than the mouthpieces of corporate power**





## Frames from the campaign video produced by Luke Flegg of Passionworks P

### CAMPAIGN

# WE'LL STOP MU

RUPERT MURDOCH is bidding to control even more of Britain's media than he does already. On top of his huge newspaper and commercial radio interests he's trying to buy up Sky, the biggest TV company in Europe.

The CPBF is a central part of the movement to stop him and is launching a £20,000 appeal to

make sure the campaign succeeds.

Murdoch's TV and film corporation 21st Century Fox has suddenly been rocked by aggressive bids from rival communications multinationals intent on dismembering it to walk off with its studios and movie properties. Fox might well not survive intact. It seems as if the future of the industry is pivoted on the outcome of the Sky bid.

Blocking the buyout is now the top priority for people who want better media – free from the control of mega-corporations and more accountable to their readers and staff.

In December the CPBF is launching a crowd-funding appeal to raise £20,000 for the campaign.

The CPBF is part of the Media Reform Coalition that lobbies against the takeover particularly with official bodies – and it is working! Because of the pressure, the government has had to refer it to the regulators, which will drag the process out until well into next year and cost the Murdochs billions.

We need to use this time to make sure that it ends with a firm "no". We are already putting

**From the infamous lies about Hillsborough to a routine bloodlust for criminal wars, Murdoch's influence will continue to grow if people allow it. He now wants to take over Sky TV completely and of course he has powerful political allies. But these are times of rising political resistance, and he can be stopped by a united popular campaign. Please give your support.**

**John Pilger**

**The CPBF fights for free and responsible media in which the rights of workers and their unions are respected. That's the only combination that can win a truly free press – independent of the state and big business alike.**

**Michelle Stanistreet,  
General Secretary, NUJ**

material on [www.cpbp.org.uk](http://www.cpbp.org.uk) and have produced half a dozen submissions to the government, pamphlets and other material.

We have had meetings with officials at Ofcom and the CMA to press the case against the takeover. But we need to produce regular updates and a blog on the site, to be shared widely. We are planning public events and to team up with other groups that are actively fighting the sexism, racism and islamophobia of the Murdoch press. These mean employing a campaigner to co-ordinate the work.

The Murdochs have through their media not just spread lies and "fake news" but discrimination, victimisation and hatred among people.

The CPBF has been fighting them for years, supporting all kinds of action, including boycotts and strikes by their workers.

While political leaders grovelled to the Murdochs, it was the media unions, a few investigative journalists and campaigning organisations like the CPBF, that kept up the pressure on the Murdoch media year after year.

For more information, go to [www.cpbp.org.uk](http://www.cpbp.org.uk)

## THERE'S EVEN A REWARD ...

To donate to the crowdfund appeal, go to [www.cpbp.org.uk/stopmurdoch](http://www.cpbp.org.uk/stopmurdoch)

There are rewards on offer for donors that include:

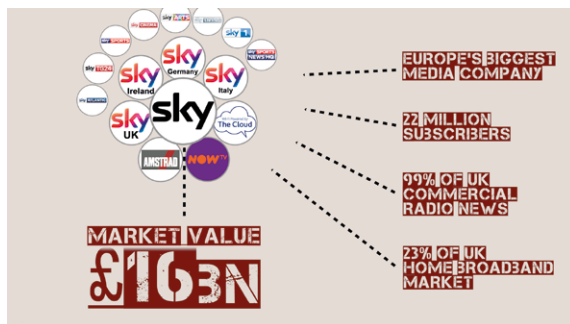
- Ticket to the 2018 Byline Festival of Radical Media in the Sussex countryside, next August
- Private dinner with journalist Nick Davies, the Guardian investigative journalist who broke the phone-hacking story
- Copy of *Hack Attack*, Nick Davies's book on the phone-hacking trial of 2015.
- DVD *Despite the Sun*, the story of the great Wapping dispute in which Murdoch set out to destroy the workers' unions
- DVD *Belonging*, award-winning documentary also telling the

Wapping story with other major disputes

- Book *Big Media and Internet Titans*, published by the CPBF on the dangers of the corporate media
- Book *Settling the Scores*, published by the CPBF on the media and the miners' strike
- Book *Untold Murder*, on the sensational murder of private eye Daniel Morgan and the involvement of the Murdoch press in the case
- Copy of DVD *One Rogue Reporter*, made by redeemed former Fleet Street hack Richard Peppiatt, now a media comedian

**For 30 years the CPBF has campaigned for quality public service broadcasting, control on media ownership and a diverse media that serves all citizens. The CPBF deserves our thanks and support.**

**Gerry Morrissey,  
General Secretary, BECTU**



## Productions to support the CPBF's Stop Murdoch! crowdfunder

# MURDOCH AGAIN

## WHAT WE STAND FOR

THE CAMPAIGN for Press and Broadcasting Freedom has been at the centre of radical media politics for more than 30 years. We were founded by activists in the media unions in 1979 to work for more accountable, independent and diverse media.

We work alongside trade unions, civil society groups and social movements to create alternative, democratic and independent media as a response to being denied a voice in the mainstream.

We publish pamphlets and a Media Manifesto highlighting the main media questions at each UK general election, plus a journal, *Free Press*.

BIG MEDIA, owned and controlled by powerful corporations, need to be made to meet certain standards of responsibility.

They must be independent not just of the state but also of the unfettered power of the big corporations.

There must be limits on how many outlets any company or group can own.

All media – newspapers, magazines, radio, TV and the internet – must acknowledge and correct everything they get wrong – granting right to reply to everyone they have maligned.

The industry must be fully unionised, giving staff a voice in the workplace. Journalists must be able to work to professional ethical standards, with the right to refuse instructions to use nefarious methods such as phone-tapping or bribery.

## Look at Sky in Australia ...

IN AN almost identical process to the UK Sky takeover bid, a Murdoch company which previously held a minority share bought out Sky News Australia.

There has been widespread condemnation of the subsequent conversion of evening schedules into "Foxified" talkshows – in line with what the CPBF and others warn would happen in the UK.

It was Murdoch's original Australian company, News Corp, rather than 21st Century Fox, that bought out Sky News Australia, but the result is what it would be in the UK. The evening schedule consists, like Fox in the US, of a series of strident right-wing opinion-led talk programmes.

The talkshow presenters include Andrew Bolt, a far-right columnist on News Corp's *Herald Sun*, and Paul Murray, a former radio "shock jock" with an aggressive right-wing style.

Media commentator Denis Muller wrote: "Paul Murray [is] a crass vulgarian who swaggers about the set unburdening himself of a string of grotesqueries ... its stable of commentators and panel chairs is

skewed to the right ...."

Mark Day, a respected and pro-Murdoch former newspaper editor, wrote in Murdoch's own Australian: "Sky's shift to full prime-time opinion programming broadly follows the ... Fox News format in the US ... Increasingly I have felt that opinion programming may have gone a step too far."

Another former Murdoch luminary who has come out against the move is John Menadue, general manager of Murdoch's Australian newspaper company from 1967-74, as well as an Australian ambassador, government minister, and head of civil service departments. He said that News Corp was "a rogue organisation ... a disgrace. It's trampled on democracy in three continents, it's damaged the media enormously in three countries."

Full information on this development in Australia is included in the submission that the CPBF made to the Competition and Mergers Authority in October – the latest of the four reports presented since March to regulators examining the Murdoch bid.

**The media bosses remain powerful and only through a high profile campaign can we fully seize the moment and focus public support for real change. The CPBF can provide this focus, and Unite, a proud CPBF affiliate for many years, fully supports the campaign.**

**Len McCluskey, General Secretary, Unite**

## Ofcom raps Fox over biased news

MEDIA regulator Ofcom has ruled that two Fox News programmes breached impartiality rules when the channel was broadcast in the UK.

Sky pulled Fox News from its platform in Britain in August, saying the move was for commercial reasons. Ofcom said it was publishing the rulings despite this "to ensure there is a complete compliance record and to facilitate public understanding of the code".

An episode of *Tucker Carlson Tonight* shortly after the Manchester terrorist attack accused UK authorities of failing to counter terrorism and protect "thousands of underage girls" from rape and abuse. They were accused of forcing an "official lie" on citizens that was "totalitarian" and "wicked".

Ofcom ruled there was "no reflection of the views

of any of the authorities or people criticised"; the presenter "did not challenge the views of his contributors; instead, he reinforced their views."

A ruling on *Hannity*, presented by Sean Hannity, related to coverage of Trump's travel ban and said that views critical of the ban in were "repeatedly dismissed or ridiculed by the presenter. ... coupled with clear support being expressed for the policies of President Trump."

The Hannity show has been hit by an advertising boycott by five major companies after its on-air support for Alabama Republican Senate candidate Roy Moore and accusations that the four women who accused the former judge of sexual misconduct this week were lying.

# When our media go

Advertising on the internet has yet to reap the rewards that publishers have hoped for. While the internet giants pile up profits from providing the platforms, income for publishers is well below what it would once have been for equivalent print.

Online publishers are being driven to make more and more concessions to attract advertisers, offering space for paid-for copy disguised as editorial, and this direct involvement by brands in media content has exploded into what is now known as “native advertising”.

It’s a major problem for media freedom that was discussed at a special conference of the Branded Content Research Network in London in November.

Report by **JONATHAN HARDY**, the CPBF’s National Secretary, who organised the event.



JAMIE MURRAY UEL

CAMPAIGNING JOURNALIST James Cusick of the openDemocracy website held a can of beans in the air and asked: what is more important, the contents of this can, or who is behind the content of news media online?



He told the London meeting on the dangers of branded content: “You have a right to know the contents of the tin, so why not for something arguably even more important, news publications?”

There were more legal requirements to identify the contents of the beans than there were for news journalism, where sponsored content was increasingly being foisted onto the public without adequate identification.

This kind of content has become known as “native advertising”, described by the Interactive Advertising Bureau as “ads that are so cohesive with page content, assimilated into the design, and consistent with the platform, that the viewer simply feels that they belong”.

Native advertising now accounts for a third of UK display advertising. In print, such copy was known as “advertorial” – and traditionally presented as such, with distinctive design and typography and often a notice saying “Advertisement” at the top.

There are still industry rules that marketing communications must be clearly identified as such, so that people know when they are being sold to. But the rules are not working. This we know, because surveys reported to the conference showed that the public are not aware of the origin of what is being presented to them.

Research reported by Michelle Amazeen of Boston University in the USA demonstrated that, even with prominent labelling, barely a tenth of all readers were aware of native advertising content, a figure in line with other research studies. “Whatever the protestations of marketers and publishers,” she said, “the majority of readers are still largely unaware of brand-voiced content.”

Prominent labelling and identification of native advertising did help recognition, she said, and people who were aware that they were reading advertising were more resistant to the messaging. Disclosures can “inoculate” against marketer persuasion by motivating greater resistance.

So audiences were more receptive to native advertising when publishers were clearer about its commercial nature. It was the concealment that put people off. The findings have implications for reputable publishers seeking to strengthen the trust and support of readers. She said: “readers want control”. One had told researchers: “I do not want to have to read

something that is not purely news, unless I choose to do so”.

But another speaker from the USA, Joseph Turow of the University of Pennsylvania, said that the political economic forces driving new marketing trends were simply too powerful to be contained by regulation, however desirable. He said developments in the marketing communication industry point to an entirely new logic for reaching out to consumers, involving personalisation and artificial intelligence.

He called this “conversational advertising”, citing the online artificial-intelligence “personal assistants” such as Siri, Alexa, Google assistant and others, who will bring brand choice and communications into our homes and lives.

Amazon already makes deals with brands to privilege their products in the household



Joseph Turow: regulation impossible

JAMIE MURRAY UEL

products it promotes. All these developments require people to give up their data, yet most have little idea what happens to it.

The US regulator, the Federal Trade Commission, issued guidelines on advertising content two years ago but has only brought one successful legal action – against the non-disclosure of paid promotions by a clothing firm.

IN THE UK, research by the Interactive Advertising Bureau (IAB), the industry trade association, also showed that trust in a brand or publisher can diminish if the origin of the content is unclear. The IAB’s Christie Dennehy-Neil outlined the IAB’s disclosure principles, which include the use of prominent visual cues and up-front labelling.

Christie Dennehy-Neil argued that it was in the interests of the industry to retain the trust and confidence of consumers and follow the



# native

IAB's best practice guidance for relevance, value and clarity in advertising.

These changes raise profound issues of privacy, ethics and social power as the discriminations arising from the collection and use of data intensify. Certainly there is a case for stricter, more consistent labelling against the confusing array of terms encountered, from "special feature" to "supported by ..."

The likely route to more effective regulation will involve a mix of enforceable law, industry codes and constant monitoring of user awareness and attitudes to sometimes rapidly evolving encounters with screens and spaces where paid promotions occur.

But there is much more to this debate than the transparency of advertising. There is the effect of native advertising on the quality and "integrity" of media. Even the International Public Relations Association says the PRs should "not engage in practice which tends to corrupt the integrity of any channel of communication".

Then there is the power and extent of marketers' voices in communications as a whole. Societies have sought to allow marketers to communicate, but set limits to serve a variety of social purposes – from rules on where outdoor posters can appear, to regulations on product placement. So the key concerns are not just the recognition of advertising by consumers, but also what happens if the voice of marketers overwhelms valued features such as editorial independence from sponsor interests in news publishing.

We need greater transparency about the commercial sources for news stories, and better regulation keeping editorial and advertising apart. And we need to end the hypocrisy of media outlets denouncing one kind of fake news, like internet lies, while embracing another, like disguised advertising.

■ The event was the founding conference of the Branded Content Research Network, coordinated by Jonathan Hardy. The network brings together a range of interests and perspectives across academia, industry, media unions and civil society. We all agree that the relationship between brands and communications matters for society as well as for business, and that all those affected are involved in debate about their impact and regulation.

**People are required to give up their data, yet most have little idea what happens to it**



## Friday 13: ominous for BBC, let-off for ITV

THE COMMUNICATIONS regulator Ofcom has set rigid requirements for the BBC in the draft operating licence it published on Friday October 13th.

Ofcom took over regulation of the corporation in April and has now laid out requirements much tougher than those for the commercial sector, forcing the BBC into an area of more expensive but less popular programming.

The draft licence, entitled "Holding the BBC to account for delivering for audiences", says BBC programmes "should be distinctive from those provided elsewhere", defined as "substantially different to other comparable providers across each and every UK Public Service both in peak time and overall".

The requirements are extensive and detailed. They cover news and current affairs, children's programmes and regional programming, with

minimum hours of network programmes that must be made in each nation at 30 per cent for England (outside the M25); 8 per cent for Scotland; 4 per cent for Wales (moving to 5 per cent from 2022); and 2 per cent for Northern Ireland (rising to 3 per cent).

Support for all these areas is welcome, but they are areas in which the BBC already outperforms its rivals.

There is now no requirement on the other national commercial broadcasters, also licensed by Ofcom, notably the BBC's main rival ITV, to produce any original children's programmes, and their regional and current affairs obligations have over the years been whittled down to very little. Yet Ofcom has not "held [ITV] to account" over the balance of its programmes; indeed when asked to relax ITV's obligations it has frequently acceded.

The BBC's expanded obligations come at a time when the licence fee is frozen and the pressure on its income is possibly greater than it has ever been. The document goes well beyond what would normally be expected of a regulator,

especially Ofcom, which was set up in 2003 with the explicit aim to deregulate; the regulators it replaced had required the ITV companies to broadcast high quality current affairs and other non-commercial genres at peak times in the way the BBC is now.

The document is couched in terms which often sound like a teacher dealing with an unruly child: "The Licence sets a wide range of regulatory conditions that the BBC must meet. Our new regulatory conditions raise the bar for the BBC. In most areas, they place tougher requirements on the broadcaster than existed before, as well as safeguarding key areas of

delivery ... We expect the BBC to meet all the requirements we have set; if it does not, we will take steps to enforce them".

In effect Ofcom has taken over the BBC's senior management,

planning and scheduling the output, laying down quotas for every genre, and frequently specifying the time of day when programmes should be broadcast on both radio and television. Quotas, scheduling, commissioning and performance measurements add up to a great deal of box ticking.

When the first BBC Director-General John Reith oversaw the BBC's move from a commercial company to a publicly-funded corporation in 1926, and made it his business to "educate and inform" the British public. He was less convinced about the third term – "entertain".

But the Calvinist Reith was suspicious of the role of the BBC to entertain for very different reasons from those of his successors. The government and Ofcom now want to restrict the BBC to making serious, expensive heavyweight programming such as current affairs, national and regional, plus high quality drama and children's programmes around which there are rules on accompanying advertising – to leave the more popular entertainment to the profit-making sector.

*Patricia Holland*

## It's a game of Old Men's Buff

THERE IS a novel by Gabriel Garcia Marquez called *The Autumn of the Patriarch* about the terminal decline of a Latin American dictator. The old tyrant is getting bored and cynical and everyone knows his time in office is up, but he still carries on trying to fix and fiddle things and no-one can summon the guts to tell him to go.

Remind you of anyone?

Yes – of course, Robert Mugabe. Wicked old patriarch, an embarrassment, well past his sell-by but refused to go. He had an ambitious young trophy wife and was desperate to ensure he was succeeded by his family. Other bosses wanted to take over themselves, so he got them sacked – they and done terrible things and there were plenty of complaints against them so there were always reasons. Neighbouring countries were threatening to take over and ...

No, no, much worse than him.

Er ... Arsene Wenger?

Even wrinklier. Sad old git in his 80s, all dodderly and shrivelled up but tries to carry on like he was young. Shuffles around in a baseball cap. Makes terrible miscalculations – always trying to expand his empire and can't see that it is beyond his reach because no-one trusts him. It's just his two greedy and ruthless sons who flatter him and egg him on ...

OK got it! Robert Maxwell – he had two sons he wanted to succeed him didn't he?

## Murdoch's old bluff

WHAT IS IT about Amol Rajan, the one-time editor of the Independent, that the BBC likes so much? They made him media correspondent and presenter of the Media Show, and now they seem to be trying him out at presenting virtually every programme on Radio 4. Is he being groomed for the Today programme?

I have questioned his judgement on media stories before, but what was he doing in November when he got onto every bulletin with

## ODDWARD SWKAWK



TIM GOPSILL

a story that Murdoch was threatening to close Sky News if the government wouldn't let him buy up the whole group?

This was the same day it was revealed that Fox was in talks to itself sell off most of its movie and TV assets to Disney. That was real news – though the talks later fizzled out – but the BBC ignored it. The Sky News threat is almost as old as Rupert himself. He uses whenever he has a tough issue with the UK government.

I'll be kindly and allow that Amol Rajan didn't know that, or that he is just dim. Otherwise, why on earth should the BBC be spinning for Murdoch?

## Nothing to do with us

AS PART OF the pitch to buy Sky, James Murdoch issued another public warning to government – that turning down the bid would jeopardise Britain's prosperity after Brexit.

Brexit makes it more important than ever that the country attracts investment, he said. "So if the UK truly is open for business post-Brexit, we look forward to moving through the regulatory review process, and this transformational trans-action for the UK creative sector becoming an affirmation of that claim."

This is convoluted nonsense, but he didn't address the question of why the UK economy has this Brexit problem to overcome at all.

Nothing to do with Murdoch press's xenophobia and anti-EU propaganda over 30 years, of course.

## 'Non-rational persuasion'

IT'S THE oldest question in media studies: do the media influence public opinion, or is it the other way round? Plenty of academics make a living studying it, even though it's a question that has no answer; chickens and eggs again.

But now academics at Harvard University have come up with one solution, though from a pretty obvious example. They have shown that prolonged exposure to Fox News in the USA can give people a propensity to vote Republican.

Fox is a cable channel so is not universally available; only where there is a local station that signs up to carry it. Between 1996 and 2000, Fox News was introduced in 20 percent of US towns.

The Harvard team found that in those towns Fox News convinced between 3 and 8 per cent of its viewers to vote Republican. They commented sagely: "It could be a temporary learning effect for rational voters, or a permanent effect for voters subject to non-rational persuasion."

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There will be no prosperity in digital publishing until either they all sell their souls to "native" advertisers, which can't be stopped by ad-blocking software; or people agree to pay for it. I can't see why everything on the internet should be free. We should be educating people to spend that £30 a week on subscriptions, buying media features or donating to crowdfunds for new ventures. Come on CPBF!

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