

Five Reasons Why We Don't Have a Free and Independent Media in the UK and What We Can Do About It

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While most of us [don't trust journalists](#), many of us [are still](#) under the illusion that we have a free and independent press.

The truth is we don't.

Here's five reasons why we should be very sceptical of the information we read in the corporate media and why there is hope for the future.

1) The billionaires that own the press set the agenda

Who owns the media shapes what stories are covered and how they are written about. The UK media has a very concentrated ownership structure, with six billionaires owning and/or having a majority of voting shares in most of the national newspapers.

UK national paper(s)	Effective owner(s)	Info on owner	Newspaper's political support General Election 2015	Weekly readership (print & online combined, removing duplicates)
Daily Mail & Mail on Sunday	Lord Rothermere	Billionaire. Lives in France. Tax avoider .	Conservative	11,374,000
Metro	Lord Rothermere	See above.	No endorsement, but Conservatively aligned.	7,727,000
The Sun & Sun on Sunday	Rupert Murdoch	Billionaire. Lives in US. Tax avoider .	Conservative except in Scotland where SNP	9,550,000
The Times & Sunday Times	Rupert Murdoch	See above.	Conservative	3,810,000
Express & Sunday Express	Richard Desmond	Billionaire. Lives in UK. Tax avoider .	UKIP	3,521,000

Daily Star & Daily Star Sunday	Richard Desmond	See above.	No endorsement	2,405,000
Telegraph & Sunday Telegraph	David & Frederick Barclay	Billionaires. Live on private island under the jurisdiction of the tax haven Sark .	Conservative	5,142,000
London Evening Standard	Alexander & Evgeny Lebedev	Alexander is a billionaire or close to it, ex-KGB and lives in Russia. His son, Evgeny lives in UK.	Conservative	4,179,000
The Independent	Alexander & Evgeny Lebedev	See above.	Conservative /Lib-Dem	1,710,000
Financial Times	Nikkei Inc.	Public Limited company.	Conservative / LibDem	2,200,000
Mirror & Sunday Mirror	Trinity Mirror plc	Public Limited Company.	Labour	6,216,000
Guardian & Observer	Scott Trust Ltd	Limited Company.	Labour	5,618,000
Daily Record & Sunday Mail	Trinity Mirror plc	Public limited company.	Labour	1,363,000
Table adapted from blog by Tom London . Figures from data released by the National Readership Survey (NRS) in Nov 2016, based on data from October 2015 – September 2016 . Financial Times data from their website is PwC assured from November 2011 and is based on daily readership as weekly figures not public nor recorded by the NRS.				

True editorial independence often doesn't exist in these papers. The owners can – and do – interfere with what is published in their publications, which editors and journalists are promoted or fired as well as which political parties the paper supports.

For example, Harold Evans, a former editor at the Sunday Times, made it very clear to the Leveson Inquiry how Rupert Murdoch interfered with the [content of the paper](#). Evans was often rebuked for “not doing what he [Murdoch] wants in political terms,” including when reporting on the economy. Evans recounted how they almost came to “fisticuffs” because he allowed an economist (James Tobin) to publish an article with differing viewpoints to Murdoch in the Sunday Times. According to Evans, Murdoch’s “determination to impose his will” destroyed the “editorial guarantees that he’d given.”

Evans went on to say:

“Mr Murdoch was continually sending for my staff without telling me and telling them what the paper should be. He sent for the elderly and academic Mr Hickey, who went in tremulously, to be told by Mr Murdoch, “Your leaders are too long, too complex. You should be attacking the Russians more.””

David Yelland, a former editor of The Sun – another Murdoch owned paper – admitted in [an interview](#):

“All Murdoch editors, what they do is this: they go on a journey where they end up agreeing with everything Rupert says but you don’t admit to yourself that you’re being influenced. Most Murdoch editors wake up in the morning, switch on the radio, hear that something has happened and think: what would Rupert think about this? It’s like a mantra inside your head, it’s like a prism. You look at the world through Rupert’s eyes.”

During the Leveson inquiry, when asked about this, Murdoch was also reminded he [had previously said](#), “If you want to judge my thinking, look at the Sun.” Murdoch admitted that frequent phone calls happened between the editors and him, although as Yelland shows, the influence of Murdoch could also be more subtle, with editors internalising his values and opinions.

Even The Guardian is compromised, although not as much as other national media companies. The [Scott Trust Limited](#), which owns The Guardian, is wholly owned by the company directors who are prohibited from taking [any dividends](#). The Guardian also claims to be guided by a range of [progressive values](#), including the task of maintaining its editorial independence. However, as Nafeez Ahmed points out in [Insurge Intelligence](#), some members [of its board](#) are ex-financiers – binding the Guardian into Britain’s murky financial world in a way which may surprise many of its readers.

With six billionaires as majority voting shareholders for most of the UK national newspapers, it is unsurprising that they mostly supported the Conservatives in the last general election. The Conservatives reduced the top tax rate, and want to reduce it further, giving millionaires and billionaires massive tax breaks. Under the current media ownership structure, how much hope is there of genuine progressive agendas to reduce wealth, income and power inequality that also threatens the interests of the billionaires and companies that own the press?

2) Corporate advertising revenue censors the content

The media relies heavily on corporate advertising, often for more than [50% of its revenue](#). Just how much varies for different media outlets. Peter Osborne, former chief political commentator at *The Telegraph*, resigned from his job after he was censored from writing about HSBC because it was one of the paper’s major corporate advertisers. He wrote [in openDemocracy](#):

“From the start of 2013 onwards stories critical of HSBC were discouraged...Its account, I have been told by an extremely well informed insider, was extremely valuable. HSBC, as one former Telegraph executive told me, is ‘the advertiser you literally cannot afford to offend.’”

Osborne went on to say:

“The Telegraph’s recent coverage of HSBC amounts to a form of fraud on its readers. It has been placing what it perceives to be the interests of a major international bank above its duty to bring the news to Telegraph readers. There is only one word to describe this situation: terrible.”

This situation is not exclusive to the Telegraph. As Nafeez Ahmed [points out](#):

“Here’s something you won’t read in the *Guardian*. During the Treasury Select Committee meeting on 15th February, it emerged that the newspaper that styles itself as the world’s “leading liberal voice” happens to be the *biggest recipient* of HSBC advertising revenue: bigger even than the *Telegraph*.”

Media heavily reliant on corporate advertising is compromised as it influences what is and isn’t written about. As David Edwards and David Cromwell of Medialens [have written](#):

“this corporate structure not only trims individual stories, it excludes entire frameworks of understanding. If writing something disagreeable about HSBC or animal rights is problematic, imagine editors consistently presenting corporate domination as a threat to human survival in an age of climate change.”

Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman give many more examples of this [here](#).

How often do we read articles in newspapers critiquing capitalism, let alone corporate capitalism? Just imagine what would happen to a newspaper’s advertising revenue if it consistently critiqued corporate capitalism. Just think what else is excluded from the press because it would seriously challenge corporate advertisers.

3) Privately educated white men dominate the media

There are different [studies showing](#) the dominance of a private-school and Oxbridge educated elite at the top of UK journalism, and the trend has been getting worse. The recent Social Mobility and [Child Poverty study](#) found out that nearly half of UK national newspaper columnists graduated from Oxford or Cambridge (as opposed to [less than 1 per cent](#) of the population) and that 54 per cent of the nation’s “top 100 media professionals” attended private schools (compared to around [7 per cent](#) of the population).

This creates an upper middle-class worldview in much of the media – as well [as in many other professions](#) – which is divorced from the wants and needs of large parts of the population. As Oxbridge educated journalist, *Frank Cottrell Boyce*, has written [in The Independent](#):

“Only 25 per cent of the population earns more than £30,000 a year. Most media commentators (including me) do. For people like me, the country basically works. Politics doesn’t affect me. Politics, for me, is about how other people are treated. It’s easy inside my echo-chamber to believe that I am the norm, or the middle. Easy to forget that there are voices outside.

“To people in my position, austerity can be read as regrettable but pragmatic. But to my friends and family, who live outside the bubble, it’s not regrettable,

it's terrifying. It's also not pragmatic. The crackpot, gimcrack ideological nature of austerity becomes more apparent the closer you get to the point of delivery."

Mark Mardell, a privately educated journalist, echoed a similar but tamer view [for the BBC](#):

"It is hardly surprising that Westminster journalists crave the ideologically soft centre. None is on the minimum wage, let alone tax credits, nor are any, to my knowledge, owners of third homes on the Cayman Islands, or running big corporations. They are nearly all university educated and live in London or the South East of England (Yes, all that goes for me, too). There is group-think in the muddled middle, a fear of thinking outside a comfortable box."

It is not just [private and Oxbridge](#) education which dominates the media. Due to the under-representation of Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) journalists, as well as the frequent racist portrayal of [BAME people](#) in the media, [Media Diversified](#) was set up to try and combat this.

Women are also heavily under-represented, both in journalists employed but also in the amount of coverage received. Research on the UK media by [Professor Lis Howell](#) found that between April 2014 and September 2015 the number of male experts interviewed on flagship news programmes outnumbered female experts by 3.16: 1, with ITV News at 10 having 4.9 male experts for every woman. In previous research, Prof Howell also found ten times as many UK male politicians featured on the news [as female politicians](#). Research by [Women in Journalism](#) and [others](#) in 2012 also found that men dominated news stories in a wide range of ways, such as front page stories being about or written by men around 80 per cent of the time.

Even if they wanted to, these privileged and predominantly white, male, privately educated, Oxbridge graduates often can't truly understand, let alone accurately represent in the media, the situations and choices faced by most people as they are outside their own life experiences.

How many have strong links with working class communities? How many of these influential journalists have been long-term unemployed, on low incomes, on benefits or tax credits, with long-term health conditions or have faced racism or sexism? How many fall back into repeating ideas to each other within the "echo-chamber" of the privately and/or Oxbridge educated, while falsely believing they are in the "muddled middle"?

4) The political use of supposedly neutral sources

The sources which are used by journalists and the range of debate published within the UK media can show us another way in which the corporate media is deeply compromised. There have been academic studies proving that systemic bias exists in how the media covers events. Three events can be used as examples - the Scottish referendum, the 2008 financial crisis and the second Iraq war.

A team of academics studied the coverage of the Scottish independence referendum between 17 September 2012 and 18 September 2013, looking at 730 hours of evening TV news output broadcast by BBC 1, Reporting Scotland, ITV and Scottish TV (STV), and found

them all to be biased against Scottish independence.

(Professor John Robertson summarising his research and the different ways the media was biased against Scottish independence)

As Professor Robertson of the University of the West of Scotland (UWS) has [outlined](#), anti-independence statements were aired over pro-independence statements at a ratio of around 3:2 on most channels. The research also showed a clear tendency to use anti-independence over pro-independence 'expert' sources, including from organisations presented as independent and/or impartial despite their linkages to UK government departments with a vested interest in maintaining the union.

After Robertson's research was published it was stonewalled and mostly unreported by the BBC. The BBC then went above Robertson's head to his Principal at the UWS to try (unsuccessfully) to discredit the research and colleagues of his were even warned to ["stay away" from him!](#) Robertson followed up this research with a one-month intensive study of BBC Scotland's extended 'flagship' politics show, Good Morning Scotland, which found similar bias around the [independence campaign](#).

Paul Mason, former economics editor for the BBC's Newsnight and economics editor for Channel 4 News, confirmed this bias when he later told his Facebook followers of the BBC's referendum coverage: "Not since Iraq have I seen BBC News working at propaganda strength like this. [So glad I'm out of there.](#)"

Other studies of the media have found similar results of bias in relation to the financial crisis. Dr Mike Berry, of Cardiff University, authored such a study - *The Today programme and the banking crisis* ([not open access](#)). The table below, from the study, shows the sources featured during the intense six weeks of coverage on the BBC's Today programme following the collapse of Lehman Brothers in 2008.



These numbers are even likely to be skewed. Mike Berry points out that many of the individuals classified as politicians, regulators, academics and business representatives "also have close links with the City and broader financial services community," and therefore the prominence of 'City voices' is "very conservatively estimated."

He continues:

"Since the main three British political parties during this period were all committed to free markets and 'light touch' regulation, there is a narrowness in the range of opinion available to listeners. This is magnified by the presence of other groups such as business lobbyists, neoclassical economists and journalists from the financial press who all tend to share a similar laissez-faire outlook on how the economy should be managed. Organised labour is almost completely absent from the Today programme with only a single appearance from one union leader (0.4%)."

Considering the impact of the financial crisis on the UK workforce, and that trade unions

represent the largest mass democratic organisations in civil society, such invisibility shows the BBC is not truly committed to impartial and balanced coverage.

As Mike Berry points out [in The Conversation](#), opinion of the financial crisis:

“was almost completely dominated by stockbrokers, investment bankers, hedge fund managers and other City voices. Civil society voices or commentators who questioned the benefits of having such a large finance sector were almost completely absent from coverage. The fact that the City financiers who had caused the crisis were given almost monopoly status to frame debate again demonstrates the prominence of pro-business perspectives.”

The choice of sources used not only influences whether countries become independent, or how financial sectors are regulated or nationalised, but whether they go to war or not. The practice of uncritically using (anonymous) government sources is often used to justify war and state oppression, as Glenn Greenwald points out [in The Intercept](#):

“Western journalists claim that the big lesson they learned from their key role in selling the Iraq War to the public is that it’s hideous, corrupt and often dangerous journalism to give anonymity to government officials to let them propagandize the public, then uncritically accept those anonymously voiced claims as Truth. But they’ve learned no such lesson. That tactic continues to be the staple of how major U.S. and British media outlets “report,” especially in the national security area.”

Greenwald goes on to say of an article in the Sunday Times, which was used to smear whistleblower Edward Snowden:

“The whole article does literally nothing other than quote anonymous British officials. It gives voice to banal but inflammatory accusations that are made about every whistleblower from Daniel Ellsberg to Chelsea Manning. It offers zero evidence or confirmation for any of its claims. The “journalists” who wrote it neither questioned any of the official assertions nor even quoted anyone who denies them. It’s pure stenography of the worst kind.”

This kind of reporting increases the likelihood of war and state oppression. A 2013 UK [ComRes poll](#) – which was almost entirely ignored by the media when it was published – showed how the media had completely failed to educate the population about the devastating human death toll of the war. Most people vastly underestimated how many people died in the Iraq war, with two-thirds (66 per cent) of the public estimating that 20,000 or fewer civilians and combatants died as a consequence of the war in Iraq since 2003, with around 40 per cent thinking 5,000 or less had died.

The real figures of how many people died in the Iraq war are several hundred thousand, with it highly likely to be at least 500,000, which different large academic studies [have confirmed](#) (e.g. [The Lancet](#), [PLOS Medicine](#)). As Alex Thomson, one of the very few prominent journalists that commented on the poll, wrote on the [Channel 4 blog](#):

“If we believe the results, then war-makers in government will take great comfort, as will the generals who work so hard to peddle the lie of bloodless warfare, with all the cockpit

video propaganda video news releases and talk of “collateral damage” instead of “dead children”.

“Equally – questions for us on the media that after so much time, effort and money, the public perception of bloodshed remains stubbornly, wildly, wrong.”

Joe Emersberger was even more damning, [writing at SpinWatch](#):

“The poll results are a striking illustration of how a “free press” imposes ignorance on the public in order to promote war. Future wars (or “interventions”) are obviously far more likely when the public within an aggressor state is kept clueless about the human cost.”

5) The intelligence services manipulate the press

While it is almost impossible to distinguish between conspiracy theories and to prove the extent to which intelligence services and specialised [police units](#) have infiltrated the media, Richard Keeble, professor of journalism at the University of Lincoln, thinks “from the limited evidence [their influence] looks to be enormous.” Keeble has written on the history of the links between journalists and the intelligence services in the book chapter – *Hacks and Spooks – Close Encounters of a Strange Kind: A Critical History of the Links between Mainstream Journalists and the [Intelligence Services in the UK](#)*. He quotes Roy Greenslade, who has been a media specialist for both the Telegraph and the Guardian, as saying: “Most tabloid newspapers – or even newspapers in general – are playthings of MI5.”

Keeble goes on to say:

“Bloch and Fitzgerald, in their examination of covert UK warfare, report the editor of “one of Britain’s most distinguished journals” as believing that more than half its foreign correspondents were on the MI6 payroll. And in 1991, Richard Norton-Taylor revealed in the Guardian that 500 prominent Britons paid by the CIA and the now defunct Bank of Commerce and Credit International, included 90 journalists.”

Keeble has given many more examples in his book chapter of the intelligence services infiltrating the media and changing the politics of the time, including around the miners strikes and Arthur Scargill in the 1980s and during the lead up to the Iraq war in 2003.

The recent revelations by former CIA [employee Edward Snowden](#) showed the extent of co-ordination between the spy agencies of the UK and America – especially between GCHQ and the NSA. They showed, for example, that western intelligence agencies attempt to manipulate and control online discourse with various tactics of [deception](#) and [reputation-destruction](#).

David Leigh, former investigations editor of The Guardian, wrote about a series of instances in which the secret services [manipulated prominent journalists](#). He claims reporters are routinely approached and manipulated by intelligence agents and identifies three ways – providing examples for each in his article – in which they do it:

- They attempt to recruit journalists to spy on other people or themselves attempt to go

under journalistic “cover.”

- They allow intelligence officers to pose as journalists “to write tendentious articles under false names.”
- And “the most malicious form”: they plant intelligence agency propaganda stories on willing journalists who disguise their origin from readers.

Leigh partly concludes that:

“We all ought to come clean about these approaches and devise some ethics to deal with them. In our vanity, we imagine that we control these sources. But the truth is that they are very deliberately seeking to control us.”

So why do many journalists continue to be duped by the intelligence services? And why are they not open about these attempts to manipulate them? David Rose, a journalist who admitted he had been the victim of a “calculated set-up” devised to foster the propaganda case for the war in Iraq, wrote [in the New Statesman](#):

“One reason, aside from the lunches and the limos, is that editors are extremely reluctant to lose the access they have: the spooks’ stories may be unreliable, but they often make good copy, and if everyone is peddling the same errors, it doesn’t much matter if they turn out to be untrue. Another, as a seasoned BBC correspondent put it to me, may be a judgment that if MI5 and MI6 sometimes peddle disinformation many viewers and readers may not very much care as ‘we’re all on the same side.’”

While we will never know the true extent of secret service influence on the media, there is no doubt that it does happen. And while some BBC correspondents may think that “we’re all on the same side” and that it doesn’t matter if MI5 and MI6 sometimes peddle disinformation, the truth is that it can sometimes have disastrous consequences, such as making war much more likely. The recent Iraq war showed us that the secret services are not always acting in the public interest.

What are the alternatives?

Our media system is deeply compromised. However there is some hope for the future as ideas not normally in the corporate media are increasingly being distributed through other channels – especially through the internet, alternative media and media co-operatives.

Alternative media such as [openDemocracy](#), [Indymedia](#), [Democracy Now](#) and [Red Pepper](#) have existed for years, while [The Canary](#) was launched online [a year ago](#). There has also been a resurgence of co-operatively owned media after some failed experiments in [the 1970s](#), with [The New Internationalist](#) (now apparently the UK’s [oldest workers’ co-operative](#)) still surviving from that period. These media co-operatives are either owned by their workers, their readers or both as multi-stakeholder co-operatives. [Corporate Watch](#) and [Strike!](#) Magazine – both workers’ co-operatives – have been running since 1996 and 2012 respectively. The Morning Star has been a reader owned co-operative for [several years](#). Ethical Consumer converted into a [multi-stakeholder co-operative in 2008](#). The [Bristol Cable](#) has recently been created by local residents as a co-operative. [Positive News](#) has

recently [been crowdfunded](#) by its readers to be a co-operative. [STIR magazine](#) is planning to transition to a co-operative structure. In the UK the co-operative movement founded their own publication in 1871 to report on the co-operative movement - the Co-operative Press - which continues as [Co-operative News](#) to this day.

There has been a surge in Scottish alternative and co-operative media. The [West Highland Free Press](#) was bought out by its employees in 2009. [Bella Caledonia](#) emerged before the Scottish referendum, and after it [The Ferret](#) was crowdfunded to pursue investigative journalism as a co-operative owned by its subscribers and journalists, and [Common Space](#) was established as a crowd-funded rolling news service.

There have also been efforts to support investigative journalism. Websites such as [Patreon](#) enable readers to support investigative journalists directly. [The Bureau for Investigative Journalism](#) also funds and supports investigative journalism. [Wikileaks](#) has also provided a very valuable resource for journalists trying to investigate what is actually going on.

Globally, there are many more examples of alternative and co-operative media. [The Media Co-op](#) is a network of local multi-stakeholder media co-operatives providing grassroots, democratic coverage of Canadian communities. [The Real News](#) is a non-profit, viewer-supported daily video-news and documentary service based in the United States. [ZNet](#) is a viewer supported alternative media outlet based in the US.

Critical perspectives on the media appear with [MediaLens](#), [Spinwatch](#), [Off Guardian](#) and [BS News](#) in the UK as well as [FAIR](#) and many others in the US.

However, alternative media does vary in quality. As has been much discussed since [Donald Trump's election](#), alternative (as well as corporate) media can be fake, far-right and/or not sufficiently fact-checked. Only if alternative/co-operative/investigative journalism is financially supported by its readers will they be able to research and write high quality articles. Together we have immense resources and power to support non-corporate media if we choose to. The Media Fund - which itself will be a multi-stakeholder [co-operative](#) - [recently](#) crowdfunded £10,000 to support the UK's media revolution, but much more is needed to ensure its success.

Other information sources (Twitter, Facebook, YouTube) - which although are corporations themselves - provide access to different viewpoints, but they can also create bubbles where people with similar beliefs follow each other and they can be compromised and censored by the corporations themselves (censorship of [Twitter](#), [Facebook](#) and [YouTube](#) exists, including of large numbers of Palestinian posts, pages and [accounts](#)). There are also dangers with the idea that everything we say should be connected to a personal profile - there are real benefits to anonymity as shown by the countless people in prison or facing trial in the Middle East for their posts on corporate social media. Ideally, for alternative media to be truly successful, we need to create alternatives to Facebook and Twitter that are open source, collectively owned and which allow anonymity if desired.

As the internet generation gets older, and hopefully less exclusively reliant on the corporate media, maybe things will continue to change. Despite relentless aggressive attacks by the corporate media against Jeremy Corbyn, which unmasked supposedly left-wing newspapers [like the Guardian](#) which three academic studies have [recently confirmed](#), he managed to win two Labour leadership elections by a landslide. [A poll](#) of those eligible to

vote for Jeremy Corbyn at the Labour leadership election a year ago found that for 57 per cent of them social media was a main source of news, as compared to around 40 per cent for the other candidates. Social and alternative media [helped lead to the rise](#) of Corbyn and changed the limits of 'acceptable' debate within the Labour party.

The fact that you're reading this means that alternative viewpoints can be sought out, read and shared. Please check out the alternative media above, share it, support it financially and/or become a member if you can. Or consider writing for – or even [setting up your own](#) – media co-operative.

Further reading:

- * [Manufacturing Consent](#): The Political Economy of the Mass Media by Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky
- * [Flat Earth News](#): An Award-Winning Reporter Exposes Falsehood, Distortion and Propaganda in the Global Media by Nick Davies
- * Guardians of Power: The Myth of the [Liberal Media](#) by David Edwards & David Cromwell
- * Good News: A co-operative solution to the [media crisis](#) by Dave Boyle
- * [The Revolution Will Not Be Televised](#): Democracy, the Internet, and the Overthrow of Everything by Joe Trippi
- * How Thatcher and Murdoch made [their secret deal](#) by Harold Evans

Documentaries on the corporate media:

[Outfoxed](#)

[Spin](#)

[Manufacturing Consent](#) – Noam Chomsky and the Media

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