

Launchpad For A Revolution? Russell Brand, The BBC And Elite Power

By [David Cromwell](#)

Theme: [Media Disinformation](#)

Global Research, October 31, 2013

[Media Lens](#) 30 October 2013

When someone with interesting things to say is granted a high-profile media platform, it is wise to listen to what is being said and ask *why* they have been given such a platform. Comedian and actor Russell Brand's 10-minute [interview](#) by Jeremy Paxman on BBC's Newsnight last week was given considerable advance publicity and generated enormous reaction on social media and in the press, just as those media gatekeepers who selected Brand to appear would have wished.

The interview was hung on the hook of Brand's guest-editing of a special edition of *New Statesman*, the 'leftwing' weekly magazine owned by the multimillionaire Mike Danson. In a rambling 4500-word [essay](#) mixing political comment, spiritual insight, humour and trademark flowery wordplay, Brand called for a 'total revolution of consciousness and our entire social, political and economic system.'

'Apathy', he said, 'is a rational reaction to a system that no longer represents, hears or addresses the vast majority of people'. He rightly noted that the public is, however, 'far from impotent', adding:

'I take great courage from the groaning effort required to keep us down, the institutions that have to be fastidiously kept in place to maintain this duplicitous order.'

These were all good points. But one of these institutions, unmentioned even once in his long essay, is the BBC.

Last Wednesday, from the safe confines of the Newsnight studio, Jeremy Paxman introduced his Russell Brand interview in archetypal world-weary mode like some kind of venerable patrician inviting a precocious, innocent upstart to join an exalted circle, just for a few moments. Paxman began by characterising Brand's *New Statesman* essay as a 'combination of distaste for mainstream politics and overweening vanity'. A Newsnight professional then flicked a switch and the prepared interview ran, filmed in an anonymous luxury hotel room. Paxman's line of attack was that Brand couldn't 'even be arsed to vote'. It continued like this:

Jeremy Paxman: 'Well, how do you have any authority to talk about politics then?'

Russell Brand: 'Well I don't get my authority from this pre-existing paradigm which is quite narrow and only serves a few people. I look elsewhere for alternatives that might be of service to humanity. "Alternate" means alternative political systems.'

JP: [Sceptical look] 'They being?'

RB: 'Well, I've not invented it yet, Jeremy. I had to do a magazine last week. I had a lot on my plate. But here's the thing it shouldn't do. Shouldn't destroy the planet. Shouldn't create massive economic disparity. Shouldn't ignore the needs of the people. The burden of proof is on the people with the power, not people doing a magazine.'

JP: 'How do you imagine that people get power?'

RB: 'Well, I imagine there are hierarchical systems that have been preserved through generations.'

JP: 'They get power by being voted in. You can't even be arsed to vote!'

RB: 'That's quite a narrow prescriptive parameter that change is within the...'

JP: 'In a democracy that's how it works.'

Of course, Paxman's establishment-friendly remarks may be attributed to playing devil's advocate. But it seems clear that Paxman really does believe we live in a functioning democracy. Certainly, the BBC man has an embarrassing faith in the good intentions of our leaders. In 2009 he [commented](#) of the Iraq war:

'As far as I personally was concerned, there came a point with the presentation of the so-called evidence, with the moment when Colin Powell sat down at the UN General Assembly and unveiled what he said was cast-iron evidence of things like mobile, biological weapon facilities and the like...

'When I saw all of that, I thought, well, "We know that Colin Powell is an intelligent, thoughtful man, and a sceptical man. If he believes all this to be the case, then, you know, he's seen the evidence; I haven't."

'Now that evidence turned out to be absolutely meaningless, but we only discover that after the event. So, you know, I'm perfectly open to the accusation that we were hoodwinked. Yes, clearly we were.'

It is indeed ironic, then, that the [gullible](#) Paxman should cast himself as a hard-bitten realist challenging a well-intentioned but naïve fantasist.

As we've [noted](#) before, the notion that we live in a proper democracy is a dangerous illusion maintained by a state-corporate media to which Paxman himself is a prominent contributor. Brand confronted Paxman directly about the limited choice of policies and politicians offered to the public:

'Aren't *you* bored? Aren't you more bored than anyone? You've been talking year after year, listening to their lies, their nonsense - then it's that one getting in, then it's that one getting in. But the problem continues. Why are we going to continue to contribute to this façade?'

But that was about as far as Brand went. He had nothing to say about the insidious role of the BBC in maintaining support for the crushing economic and political system that is, as Brand stated, destroying the planet, creating massive economic disparity and ignoring the needs of the people. By agreeing to enter the lion's den of a BBC interview, edited and packaged as a high-profile 10-minute segment on Newsnight, knowing that he would likely

boost viewing figures amongst a target younger audience without drawing attention to these parameters, *far less criticising them*, Brand let a major component of state-corporate power off the hook. He effectively contributed to the illusion that the BBC is a level platform for reasoned, vigorous and wide-ranging debate on the most serious issues affecting people and planet.

This matters because, as we have [noted](#) before, the most effective propaganda systems provide opportunities for *somedissent* while the overwhelming pattern of media coverage strongly supports state-corporate aims. And the BBC, regarded by many people as the epitome of all that is good about Britain, is arguably the most powerful media institution in this equation. After all, the BBC is still *the* news source for the majority of the public, and thus the establishment-friendly window through which the population views domestic and world affairs. An [opinion poll](#) published in May 2013 showed that 58% of the British public regards the BBC as the most trustworthy news source, far higher than its closest rivals: ITV (14%), Sky News (6%), Channel 4 News (2%) and the Guardian (2%).

The irony is that Brand referred in the interview to the safety ‘valves’ that allow steam to be let off, keeping an unjust system in place. But he was only referring to recycling and driving ‘greener’ cars like the Prius which ‘stop us reaching the point where you think it’s enough now’. So when is it ‘enough now’ to draw attention to the destructive role played by powerful elite news media, most especially the BBC?

More than once, Brand backed off from putting Paxman and the BBC in the spotlight:

RB: ‘The planet is being destroyed. We are creating an underclass. We are exploiting poor people all over the world. And the genuine legitimate problems of the people are not being addressed by our political class.’

JP: ‘All of these things may be true...’

RB: [Interjecting] ‘They *are* true.’

JP: ‘... but you took – I wouldn’t argue with you about many of them.’

RB: ‘Well how come I feel so cross with you. It can’t just be because of that beard. It’s gorgeous!’

The trivial diversion to the topic of Paxman’s beard meant that Brand’s question, ‘Well how come I feel so cross with you?’ was left hanging in mid-air. This is the point where Brand could, and should, have gone on the offensive about Paxman’s privileged position as a supposed fearless interrogator of power, the BBC man’s connection with the British-American Project once [described](#) as a ‘Trojan horse for US foreign policy’, and then extending to a critique of the BBC itself. There is no shortage of [examples](#) of BBC propaganda that could have been raised.

None of that happened.

A Menagerie Of Mockers

Brand’s espousal of popular views on Newsnight was sufficiently unsettling, however, that reactionary voices from the media class were quick to mock, denigrate or patronise him.

Former Guardian journalist Jonathan Cook [explained](#) why this is the case:

‘What indicates to me that Julian Assange, Glenn Greenwald and Russell Brand, whatever their personal or political differences, are part of an important social and ethical trend is the huge irritation they cause to the media class who have spent decades making very good livings being paid by the media corporations to limit our intellectual horizons.’

Tom Chivers, the assistant comment editor of the Daily Telegraph [told](#) his readers that Brand is an ‘unnecessary revolutionary’, and that basically the current system of capitalism works fine apart from a few ‘pockets of regression, little eddies in the forward current’.

David Aaronovitch of The Times [declared](#) via Twitter:

‘In what way was Russell Brand not an anarchist version of the maddest kind of UKIP supporter?’

[and](#):

‘If you’re angry enough it absolves you from actually thinking anything through. That’s what I got from the Brand interview on #newsnight’

Cook provided other early responses from ‘Britain’s elite journalists in Twitterland’ which ‘illustrated the general rancour they feel towards those who threaten to expose them as the charlatans they are.’

Media commentators continued to spring up to take a pop at Brand. Robin Lustig, who until last year presented The World Tonight on BBC Radio 4, [asserted](#) that Brand is ‘not only daft but dangerous’. Lustig said dismissively of Brand:

‘The truth is that he has nothing to contribute, other than the self-satisfied smirk of a man who knows he’ll never go hungry or be without a home.’

Joan Smith [exhorted](#) Brand in the oligarch-owned Independent on Sunday:

‘Go back to your lovely home in the Hollywood Hills and leave politics to people who aren’t afraid of difficult ideas and hard work. You’re one celebrity, I’m afraid, who’s more idiot than savant.’

Just last month, Smith was [bemoaning](#) the MPs who had voted against a possible war on Syria or, as she called it, ‘intervention on humanitarian grounds’. She had written:

‘We believe in universal human rights; our laws, treaties and political leaders say so.’

To be this openly credulous, to declare a belief in something because ‘our leaders say so’, is a remarkable admission for an ostensible journalist.

Simon Kelner, editor-in-chief of the Independent newspapers, [acknowledged](#) that Brand ‘articulates a strain of thinking among a growing number of young people’.

He added:

‘there was just the sense, when Jeremy met Russell, that some of the old certainties may be shifting.’

True enough. But Kelner made sure his readers knew that Brand's call to overthrow the system of capitalism that is killing the planet is '[Spartist](#) nonsense'.

In the Observer, pro-war commentator Nick Cohen even went as far as an insidious comparison between comedian Russell Brand and fascist dictator Benito Mussolini, and slyly suggested that Brand was calling for a *violent* revolution. Not true. Somehow Cohen had mangled Brand's [peaceful call](#) to 'direct our love indiscriminately.'

Cohen then added:

'artists have always made a show of being drawn towards fanaticism. Extremism is more exciting and dramatic, more artistic perhaps, than the shabby compromises and small changes of democratic societies.'

For Cohen, the 'shabby compromises' include neverending support for Britain's participation in bloody wars and violent 'interventions' in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Yemen, Pakistan...

Back To The 1980s

When the media commentariat have to resort to smears and insults you can be sure that fear of the public is playing a part. Readers may feel, then, that we are being a tad harsh on Brand. Didn't he make many cogent points, and more than hold his own against Paxman, the BBC's famed rottweiler? Indeed, yes. Brand rightly pointed out that politicians are not taking the necessary action on pressing issues such as climate:

'They're not attempting to solve these problems. They're not. They're attempting to placate the population. Their measures that are currently being taken around climate change are indifferent, will not solve the problem.'

Adding later:

'What I'm saying is that within the existing paradigm, the change is not dramatic enough, not radical enough.'

But is this really any different from what environment and social justice campaigners have been saying for decades? Go back to the 1980s, and weren't we hearing the same thing from Jonathan Porritt and the Greens, Friends of the Earth, Greenpeace and other campaigners? In many media alerts over the years, such as [here](#) and [here](#), we have pointed out that the corporate media has long suppressed, marginalised and diverted any radical challenges to the status quo. Campaigners and activists, of whatever hue and driven by whatever issue, can no longer ignore this crucial issue.

Even in Brand's 4500-word New Statesman [piece](#), he had very little to say about the corporate media. There were two passing mentions of 'media', but no mentions of 'press', 'journalism' or 'television'. Perhaps we should not be surprised that the well-intentioned Brand, a former 'MTV journalist', presenter of Big Brother's Big Mouth and an actor in big-budget movies, should have a bit of a blind spot when it comes to the corporate media.

George Monbiot [declared](#) on Twitter, perhaps only with part of his tongue in cheek, that:

'The realisation that Russell Brand ([@rustyrocks](#)) is in fact the Messiah is disorienting on so many levels.'

Others applauding Brand on social media included Alain de Botton and Jemima Khan. But few prominent supporters of Brand's 'revolution', if any, have said anything that is genuinely critical of elite power; especially of the corporate media, including the BBC. We have, for example, discussed de Botton's corporate-sponsored 'branded conversations' [here](#).

It is understandable that there was much praise for Russell Brand's Newsnight interview and New Statesman essay. To a large extent, this signifies the desperation of people to hear *any* challenge to the power-protecting propaganda that we are force-fed every day. But two crucial factors here are that Brand was selected to appear by media gatekeepers; and that media institutions, notably the BBC, escaped serious scrutiny. If Brand was a serious threat to the broadcaster's projected image as a beacon of impartiality, he would not have been chosen.

Noam Chomsky has a [cautionary note](#) on high-profile exposure in the corporate media:

'If I started getting public media exposure', he once said, 'I'd think I were doing something wrong. Why should any system of power offer opportunities to people who are trying to undermine it? That would be crazy.'

Given all that, how likely is it that the BBC would really provide a launchpad for a revolution?

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