

Struggling for breath: the ongoing decline of the right-wing press

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I have lost countless hours of my life to football management simulation games. The artificial reality wherein you pit yourself against the tactical genius of Jose Mourinho and Jurgen Klopp whilst splashing millions with wanton caprice on some grossly overrated midfield primadonna I find, for some unexplained reason, compelling. Every so often however, a game goes awry. Despite playing a tiki-taca style which would envy even Josep Guardiola, you face the ignominy of losing 1-0 to Shrewsbury Town.

It's at these points that most impotent of rages hit you. We've all had them; the ones where faced with a (usually imagined) injustice, you feel so utterly powerless you emit a primal scream in the hope of expunging your frustration via some process of mitosis.

I raise this point as increasingly I recognise this futile howl as a modus operandi of the right-wing press. This has particularly come to a head this week with two bizarre occurrences. First, both The Sun and The Mail seemed to be attempting to trend #buyapaper via a social media campaign outlining the importance of a free and unbiased press. Their role here is purportedly not only disseminating accurate information but also holding the government to account.

The latter they have achieved most effectively by demanding we 'pray for Boris' as he lay sick in the ICU, having only knowingly exposed himself to CV19 patients barely a fortnight earlier. Such was their objectivity that as he ascended hospital on a surely stage-managed Easter Day, rather than a beleaguered unfortunate he was treated like Gordon of Khartoum heading off the Mahdi's latest viral biological terror. Or maybe Jesus...

In much of the right-wing press, the response to CV19 has largely replicated their approach to both the EU and Brexit. By this, I mean it has involved a mix of reporting incorporating limited scrutiny

supplemented with sensationalist opinions put forward by nepotistic cronies masquerading as experts.

It is this state and rhetoric of the British right-wing media which has growingly appalled me. There are two parts to this. First is the general nature of their subjective, sensationalist jingoism. It takes very little effort to scrape the veneer from their hypocrisy. They champion institutions, but only insofar as those institutions abide by their prejudicial values. They claim to support 'the people', but do nothing to either effectively scrutinise governments or support the rights, interests or needs of citizens. They bemoan the decline of classic British values and standards, but celebrate the cheap, the trivial, the derivative.

Second is the persecution they manage to feel from a position of such unquestionable privilege. In a country which has been largely governed by right-wing Government and where the right-wing press accounts for almost 70% of 5m purchased daily titles, the journalists and editorial teams have the audacity to claim persecution. This mindset goes beyond notions of English exceptionalism. It is the outlook of fundamentalists, who mourn the death of free speech so long as that freedom is executed in line with their own unquestionable agenda.

I referred to the barrage of polemic from these titles as a primal scream of impotent rage earlier. And to some extent this accusation is misguided. We after all have an incompetent government of entitled buffoons of which the right-wing press can do little but approve. And we are fast tracking toward their desired hard Brexit. But I do take some comfort in the bigger picture here; that these howls are more of a death knell. Because the right-wing press is dying. And as it dies, the editorial team and obliging grifters coughing up bile on demand for the easy money of their entitled patrons see the gravy train running out.

For years, these titles have waxed lyrical about the need to avoid protectionism and the importance of an open and perpetually disrupting free market. This is an ethos which has come back to bite their proverbial arse. Over eight years, newspaper sales across the 10 largest selling national dailies fell by a staggering 46%, from 9.5m in 2011 to 5.1m in 2019. The Sun, The Mail, The Express, The

Telegraph are each shifting around half the number of units in 2020 as they were in 2010. As the wheels fall off their free ride, the desperation for attention could only ever yield one response.

Now we shouldn't forget that a large portion of the business here is moving online. Whilst print copy circulation dwindles, levels of engagement via virtual platforms is escalating. Online readership is estimated to have a daily reach across titles of around 25m and weekly reach of almost 46m^[ii]. The interesting aspect of this shift is what it has done to the balance of the market.

Purported left-of-centre dailies – the Guardian, the Mirror, the Independent/I – had always in print terms represented the underperforming end of the market. Whilst The Sun shifts 1.2m units daily and the Mail 1.15m, the Mirror is a more modest 451k and The Guardian only 132k. The shift to online medium has however seen that balance disrupted. In 2019, the daily desktop reach of the Guardian was estimated as equivalent to that of the Telegraph, Sun, Mail and Express combined^[iii].

This success can be no accident. A few years ago, the journalist Pete Osborne – himself a bastion of the right-wing press – resigned from The Telegraph mourning the decline of what he considered a British institution. His resignation was founded on the paper's continued shift toward reporting influenced by the interests of corporations at the cost of objective journalism^[iiii]. Rumours even abound that the content of many right-wing dailies come not from actual reporters but are instead dictated by owners themselves.

It's little wonder the obliging mouthpieces of the grift – Daniel Hannan, Toby Young, Tom Harwood – having been political and economic experts over the past few years now step up as highly-qualified epidemiologists.

What will be interesting will be whether this is a grift too far and delivers the dying carcass its death blow. The controversy of pro-austerity and later anti-EU views delivered by these titles has morphed into moral outrage at the contravening of personal freedoms – for personal freedoms read asset portfolios – during a global pandemic.

In place of the benefit classes or immigrants, here collateral damage is the old and frail, often the core demographic of such titles. When you turn on your core market in pursuit of a twisted ideology, you've got to ask how long you can survive as those airways tighten?

[i] <https://www.pressgazette.co.uk/uk-newspaper-and-website-readership-2018-pamco/>

[ii] <https://www.newsworks.org.uk/resources/computer>

[iii] <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/opendemocracyuk/why-i-have-resigned-from-telegraph/>