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Making the personal political

Julian Petley

Skimmington rides again

Across Europe, rituals used to be enacted against traditional targets of communal resentment or hostility – lechers, promiscuous women, nagging wives, adulterers, swindlers, misers and so on. These rituals, intended to shame and humiliate their victims, were known in different parts of England as skimmington rides, skimmity, rough music and riding the stang; in France as charivari; and in Germany as Katzenmusik. In a skimmington ride, the victim would be visited by a boisterous crowd, and

in full cry the ‘Skimmington’ would parade an effigy of the ridiculed victim seated backwards on a donkey or a wooden pole; or the victim’s person would be hauled about and made to ‘ride the stang’, in which case he or she might be roughly treated or ducked into a convenient pond or dung-heap.

(Pearson 1983, 197)

In modern times, these functions have been largely taken over by forms of journalism, not least crime reporting. As Steve Chibnall has pointed out, crime news ‘illustrates most effectively the system of beliefs, values and understandings which underlies newspaper representations of reality . . . Nowhere else is it made quite so clear what it is that newspapers value as healthy and praiseworthy or deplore as evil and degenerate in society’ (1977, x). He continues:

Crime news may serve as the focus for the articulation of shared morality and communal sentiments. A chance not simply to speak to the community but for the community, against all that the criminal outsider represents, to delineate the shape of the threat, to advocate a response, to eulogise on conformity to established norms and values, and to warn of the consequences of deviance. In short, crime news provides a chance for a newspaper to appropriate the moral conscience of its readership . . . The existence of crime news disseminated by the mass media means that people can no longer need to gather together to witness punishments. They can remain at home for moral instruction.

(Ibid., x–xi)
However, such journalism is by no means necessarily confined to crime news, and thrives in particular on the circulation of scandal. In the national press in Britain it finds its most regular home in the red tops (the Sun, Star and Mirror), the up-market Telegraph, and the mid-market tabloids the Express and the Mail. It is a form of journalism particularly associated with the Mail.

‘Opprobrious discourse’

The term ‘scandal’ refers primarily to actions, events or circumstances which involve the transgression of certain values, norms or moral codes, which, as Anthony King puts it, ‘occupy a sort of middle ground of impropriety’ (quoted in Thompson 2000, 14). Scandals, especially when amplified by the media, seriously call into question the reputation of the individual or institution concerned, and do so through the employment of what John B. Thompson calls ‘opprobrious discourse’, a form of moralising which reproaches and rebukes, which scolds and condemns, which expresses disapproval of actions or individuals. It is discourse which carries the implication that the actions bring shame, disgrace or discredit to the individual or individuals who performed them. It is a discourse which can stigmatise. (Ibid., 20)

However, scandalmongering is not only a means by which moral transgressors can be shamed before a potentially vast audience but is also, whether deliberately conceived of as such or not, a form of remoralisation which works to reinforce the validity of the values, norms or moral codes which have been transgressed. As James Lull and Stephen Hinerman argue: ‘The media scandal is but the most extreme example of how, in practice, individuals are held to an imagined, idealised standard of social conduct’ and ‘conventional morality is once again asserted as normal’ (1997, 5).

As Angela McRobbie and Sue Thornton have pointed out, in Britain, most national newspapers play ‘the role of moral guardian, ever alert to new possibilities for concern and indignation’, although different papers have their ‘own style of in-house moralism’ (1995, 570). This style reaches its apogee (or nadir, according to taste) in the Mail, and is an absolutely crucial aspect of the paper’s ideological mission. As McRobbie and Thornton argue, during the 1980s the paper was in complete harmony with Thatcherism, daily ‘reaching out to win consent through endlessly defining and redefining social questions and representing itself as the moral voice of the newly self-identified middle class as well as the old lower-middle class’ (ibid., 569). Indeed, its attempts at maintaining Thatcherite hegemony have extended way beyond the Thatcher era, the paper not only acting as a form of unofficial opposition during the ‘New Labour’ years but also excoriating the Major and Cameron governments when it felt they were deviating from the true Thatcherite path. This was a process in which amplifying scandals involving its ideological foes frequently played a key role, as Cameron discovered to his cost when in 2015 the paper serialised Michael Ashcroft and Isabel Oakeshott’s unofficial biography, Call Me Dave, which alleged that whilst an undergraduate at Oxford he had put a ‘private part of his anatomy’ into a dead pig’s mouth as part of an initiation ceremony for the Piers Gaveston Society.

‘Public ridicule and contempt’

This particular conception of journalism found its most vocal champion in Paul Dacre, who edited the Mail from 1992 to 2018 and has been editor-in-chief of Associated Newspapers.
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(now DMG Media), the publishers of the *Mail*, since 1998. In an extremely rare public appearance he explained the role of journalistic shaming in a speech to the Society of Editors:

Since time immemorial public shaming has been a vital element in defending the parameters of what are considered acceptable standards of social behaviour, helping ensure that citizens – rich and poor – adhere to them for the good of the greater community. For hundreds of years, the press has played a role in that process. It has the freedom to identify those who have offended public standards of decency – the very standards its readers believe in – and hold the transgressors up to public condemnation.

*(Quoted in McNally 2008)*

Equally unsurprisingly it also features in one-time star *Mail* columnist Melanie Phillips’s endless jeremiads against human rights, for example in an article headed ‘The Law of Human Wrongs’, on 6 December 2006, in which she argued that:

> Scorn or shaming are important in reaffirming the boundaries of what is considered acceptable behaviour and helping ensure that people adhere to them. Centuries ago, this function was performed very effectively by the stocks. Today’s Press fulfils much the same function. It allows individuals to identify those who they feel have wronged them and hold them up to public ridicule and contempt.

But perhaps rather more surprisingly, this idea of journalism’s purpose has also found an academic proponent in the shape of Tim Luckhurst, Professor of Journalism at the University of Kent. Thus in an article headlined ‘Read All About It: Britons Have Always Loved Scandal’, in the *Guardian*, on 25 May 2011, he claimed that:

> In the 115 years since the birth of professional, popular journalism ordinary readers have chosen to use their favourite titles to censure and regulate the conduct of people who have grown rich on their wages . . . The sanction of public opinion is being applied to hypocrisy of which millions disapprove.

He expanded on this theme a few days later, in the *Mail*, on 31 May 2011, in a piece under the headline ‘Why Twitter Knows More about Morality than High Court Judges’, which was quoted at length by Paul Dacre when, to his very evident irritation and indignation, he was summoned to appear before the Leveson Inquiry on 6 February 2012. Luckhurst argued that: ‘We reserve the right to scrutinise and censure the conduct of people who have grown rich on our wages or claim authority over our lives’, and, in his view, ‘the community’s interest in private wrongdoing delivers an emphatic public good’ by exposing it to the sanction of public opinion and thus creating an incentive to behave responsibly.

Such forthright declarations and endorsements of journalism’s role in shaming those in the public eye when they become involved in scandals are relatively rare outside the pages of the *Mail*, although the sentiments underlying them undoubtedly inform a great deal of writing about public figures of one kind or another in significant sections of the UK national press. And it is precisely because this kind of journalism is so common in so many national titles that it is worth examining its purpose, its underlying assumptions and its success or failure (in its own terms) more closely and critically.
Sexual-political scandals

The first, and perhaps most obvious, point to make is that attempting to shame people by putting them in the modern equivalent of the stocks doesn’t necessarily achieve the desired effect. Scandals can certainly be reputation busters, but certain types of reputations are far more vulnerable to the destructive effects of scandalmongering than others. In the political arena it certainly can and does seriously harm careers, although the damage is not necessarily terminal. For example, Cecil Parkinson was forced to resign in 1983 as both chairman of the Conservative Party and Secretary of State for Trade and Industry after it was revealed that he had made his former secretary, Sara Keays, pregnant. However, he returned as Secretary of State for Energy in 1987, was elevated to the Lords in 1992 and re-appointed as party chairman in 1997. Similarly David Mellor had to resign as Secretary of State at the Department of National Heritage in 1992 after the revelation that he had had an extra-marital affair with an actress, Antonia de Sancha, which was shortly followed by the news that in 1990 he had accepted an all-expenses-paid invitation for himself and his family to stay in a villa in Marbella rented by the daughter of a leading figure in the Palestine Liberation Organisation, with which the British government had just severed links because of its support for the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. He lost his parliamentary seat in 1997, but has since pursued a successful career in business consultancy and the media. This, ironically, included writing a column for *The People*, the paper which had done the most to propel the de Sancha scandal into the limelight. Even more ironic, given Mellor’s well-documented penchant for high society, was the column’s title: Man of the People.

The Parkinson and Mellor cases illustrate the opportunities for public shaming offered not simply by revelations of sexual indiscretions, but also by behaviour which is perceived as hypocritical. As Thompson puts it:

> Many people may not be shocked by the activity which is disclosed, and they may not adhere (or adhere consistently) to the relevant norms and codes in the practical conduct of their own lives. But they may well feel a sense of resentment towards politicians who have the temerity to prescribe forms of behaviour for others to which they themselves do not adhere.

*(2000, 126)*

For example, such an attitude was forcefully expressed by the *Mirror*, on 3 June 1996:

> The Conservatives set themselves on a pedestal to lecture the rest of us on right and wrong. They appointed themselves the high priests of modern morality – not just sexual, but in relationships, finance and even how we live our lives. But they are not the party of morality, family values and sound money, but of adultery, hypocrisy and fat cats.

Conservatives are particularly prone to accusations of hypocrisy when it comes to sex as they are widely (if mistakenly) regarded as belonging to a party whose members adhere to a strict moral code in sexual matters. Similarly Labour MPs are especially susceptible to the charge of hypocrisy when it comes to monetary scandals, as financial impropriety is perceived to be at odds with their socialist principles (again mistakenly, since many Labour MPs would not even claim to be socialists). Parkinson was especially unfortunate in that the 1983 election was fought particularly strongly on the theme of ‘family values’ – an offshoot of the ‘Victorian values’ (of a kind) whose return Mrs Thatcher had called for in an interview with Brian Walden on ITV’s *Weekend World* on 16 January that year. Similarly the John Major government (1990–1997) was
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marked by a whole series of sexual scandals which were given greatly added impetus by Major’s call at the 1993 party conference for the country to go ‘Back to Basics’. In point of fact there was little in the speech about sexuality, apart from a promise to deal with ‘the loathsome trade in pornography’, but as Debbie Epstein and Richard Johnson note:

What proved critical, however, was the adoption of a moral traditionalist tone, including the usual references to ‘the family’ and ‘responsibility’, and the labelling of the Conservative Party as the party of morality. The party was now vulnerable to every personal moral disclosure, around financial and political corruption, but also, given the press’s own agenda, around sexuality. For editors and journalists, the high-profile espousal of morality offered additional justification for the papers’ risky stories, and a further defence against threats to introduce privacy legislation against press intrusion.

(1998, 75)

Thus the next few years saw, among many other things, the resignations of: Tim Yeo, Environment and Countryside Minister, who had criticised the number of single mothers in Britain but was revealed to have fathered a child during an extra-marital affair with a Conservative councillor; the Earl of Caithness, Minister for Aviation and Shipping (an extra-marital affair that had allegedly contributed to the suicide of his wife); Hartley Booth, Parliamentary Private Secretary and married Methodist lay preacher (an affair with a young researcher); David Ashby, Parliamentary Private Secretary (married, but going on holiday with a male friend and sharing a bed with him); Michael Brown, junior government whip (an affair with a 20-year-old man when the age of consent for same-sex relationships was 21); Robert Hughes, Minister responsible for the Citizen’s Charter (an affair with a constituency worker who had come to him for advice about an abusive relationship); Richard Spring, Parliamentary Private Secretary (three-in-a-bed sex romp’ with a woman and another man); and Rod Richards, Welsh Office minister and staunch advocate of ‘Back to Basics’ (an extra-marital affair).

‘Baddest man on the planet’

However, in the field of popular culture, scandal, far from generating shame, can contribute greatly to a celebrity’s well-knownness, not to mention notoriety. Of course, how a scandal develops, and whether it succeeds as an act of public shaming, all depends on the particular circumstances of specific cases. As Ellis Cashmore puts it apropos cases involving celebrities: ‘Scandal is like an improvised explosive device, or IED: to some, a valuable, but extremely volatile resource. It can blow a nondescript figure to the stratosphere of fame in an instant, or it can wreak destruction’ (2014, 129).

Whether or not a scandal works to enhance a celebrity’s image depends very much on the nature of the scandal. Scandals which involve serious law-breaking, such as the events which led to O. J. Simpson being tried for murder in 1994/95 and imprisoned for armed robbery and kidnapping in 2008, are almost impossible to live down, although it could be argued that these acts extended so far beyond the ‘middle ground of impropriety’ as not to constitute scandals at all. On the other hand, Mike Tyson managed successfully to resume his boxing career after being gaoled for rape in 1992. Far from appearing chastened by the experience, he behaved during his comeback, which began in 1995, in a way that only intensified his ‘baddest man on the planet’ image. However, the fact that he toned down his behaviour and demeanour very considerably once he retired from boxing in 2006 strongly suggests that he had been, at least to some extent,
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playing up to the scandal-ridden persona which the media had helped to create, and had done so for sound commercial reasons. Whether the career of the film producer Harvey Weinstein will survive the numerous accusations of shameful and scandalous sexual behaviour, culminating in his arrest in May 2018 on charges of rape and sexual abuse, remains to be seen.

Given the right circumstances, and in particular astute media management, behaviour which could once be represented as so shameful as to ruin a show business career for all eternity can now not only be shrugged off but also, on occasion, put to creative, career-enhancing use. Take, for example, the Sex Pistols, whose swearing and general demeanour on Thames Television’s Today programme on 1 December 1976 catapulted them, and indeed punk as a whole, to national fame, greatly aided by a tabloid storm which lasted for days. Indeed, the Mirror headline, ‘The Filth and the Fury!’ was later used by Julien Temple as the title of his second film about the band. Ironically, while the programme did nothing but good for the Pistols, it effectively ended the television career of the interviewer, Bill Grundy, who had very clearly egged on the assembled punks. As McRobbie and Thornton observe: ‘Disapproving mass media coverage legitimises and authenticates youth cultures to the degree that it is hard to imagine a British youth “movement” without it’ (1995, 565).

Other examples that spring to mind are: the early Madonna who, as Cashmore points out, ‘refined rule breaking into a form of career advancement’ (2014, 141); Miley Cyrus, who attempted to throw off the wholesome teen idol image which she had garnered on the Disney Channel series Hannah Montana by, for example, smoking salvia with a bong, twerking and simulating sex acts with a giant foam finger at the 2013 MTV Video Music Awards, and swinging naked on a wrecking ball in the video of the same name; Rob Lowe and Paris Hilton, who both managed to revivise undistinguished acting careers on the back of the unauthorised distribution of home videos of themselves having sex; and finally Hugh Grant, whose arrest for having oral sex with a prostitute in a public place in Los Angeles in 1995 did his career no harm at all – indeed, as Cashmore states:

His notoriety, though short-lived, enabled him to exchange his image as a Cary Grant epigone and suitor of Estée Lauder’s golden girl for that of a rakish libertine. Like a rebranding exercise, an indiscretion that might have ended a career in earlier times offered the chance to adjust the public image and renew fortunes.

(Ibid., 134)

The moral of these and many other similar cases is that journalists who wish to shame people by scandalmongering would do well to remember the line from Oscar Wilde’s The Picture of Dorian Gray: ‘There is only one thing in the world worse than being talked about, and that is not being talked about.’

‘Moral bindingness’

What we have seen thus far is that certain kinds of people (particularly politicians) are more prone to scandalous stories being circulated about them, and to the attendant shaming, than are others. Certain norms are also more scandal sensitive than others, and the infringement of those that are also backed up by legal prohibitions tends to propel the action beyond the realm of mere scandal and into that of criminality. These considerations now bring us on to discussing the nature of the audiences for media scandalmongering, and their differing reactions to it.

Cashmore argues that ‘reactions to scandal, especially sex scandal, form four main categories: condemnation; indifference; resentment; and approval’ (ibid., 140). These reactions vary
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between different historical periods and different societies, as well as within the same society. One thing, however, is absolutely certain, and that is that ‘readers, viewers, listeners and the various social groups categorised under the heading of public opinion cannot be read off the representation of social issues’ in the media (McRobbie and Thornton 1995, 572). This is particularly important to bear in mind in Britain, which, extremely unusually for a western European liberal democracy, has a predominantly socially conservative national press in whose right-wing populist discourse the amplification of scandals of certain kinds, and especially of sex scandals, plays a key ideological role. To put it crudely, just because the Mail represents something as scandalous and tries to shame those involved, this doesn’t mean that it represents the view of the population as a whole – or indeed of the entirety of its own readership.

Thompson points out that, for a media scandal to ignite, the values or norms which have been transgressed ‘must have some degree of moral force or “bindingness” for some individuals or groups’ (2000, 15). However, this does not necessarily mean that the values or norms are ‘likely to elicit general or widespread consensus in a particular social-historical context’. This is particularly so in such a socially heterogeneous and diverse country as the UK. Indeed, the scandals which still populate the pages of much of the British national press tend to involve values and norms that are adhered to loosely (if at all) by most people, and may be adhered to more in principle than in practice. They are token values and nominal codes of behaviour to which many people pay lip service but which, when it comes to making key decisions, play a relatively marginal role in their lives.

(Ibid., 19–20)

This is particularly true of sexual-political scandals.

Autres temps, autres moeurs?

As noted earlier, it is the view of the Mail (and also implicit in the manner in which many other UK national papers deal with scandals) that generally accepted moral standards should determine the extent to which scandalous private information can be published. In his above-mentioned articles, Luckhurst invokes ‘ordinary readers’, ‘most Britons’, and even ‘we’, but all the reliable evidence (e.g., that collected annually by the British Social Attitudes Survey) suggests that views about sexual morality vary greatly across the population and have generally become more liberal with the passage of time. Indeed, as the then Sir David Eady put it in a speech given at Gray’s Inn on 12 December 2002:

There is no longer, if there ever was, a generally agreed code of sexual morality. Marriage no longer appears to have the particular status it used to be accorded. We are not courts of morals. Nowadays many people, particularly young people, lead lives which in the old days what [sic] would have been called ‘promiscuous’. Now it is simply known as a ‘sexually active’ or ‘fun loving’ lifestyle. If a sportsman or model does not presume to preach to the general public, why should he or she have imposed upon them by anyone, let alone judges or tabloid journalists, the standards which used to be applied from behind the twitching curtains of suburbia half a century ago—on pain of prurient exposure?

No surprise, then, that this judge is a particular hate figure for the Mail. But it is surely also significant, in this context, that while the Mail sold two and a half million copies daily in 2003
at the height of its Dacre-era success, it suffered an average annual loss of 82,000 sales between 2007 and 2012, and of 87,000 between 2012 and 2017. It now sheds at least 4 per cent of its readers every year, selling over 60,000 fewer copies a day. And for other papers, the situation is even worse.

So how can the prevalence of highly moralistic scandal stories, aimed at shaming those who have infringed certain norms and values, particularly sexual ones, be reconciled with the facts that (a) those norms and values are far less dominant within society as a whole than once they were, and (b) the papers concerned have all suffered serious declines in readership in recent decades?

**Targeting shame and scandalmongering**

There are at least three possible answers to this question. First, these stories may not appeal to the population as a whole (much of which anyway does not read newspapers, either online or in print), but they are most certainly designed to appeal to a particular newspaper’s readership. British national newspapers specialise in telling their readers what their editors believe they want to hear and in confirming those readers in their already existing beliefs and opinions, thus maintaining sales and ideological consistency at one and the same time. And as the need to hang onto readers becomes increasingly intense, so the motivation to give them more and more of ‘what they want’ becomes ever stronger. But, second, it is extremely important to understand that such stories, and especially sexual-political scandals, are frequently run not simply to appeal to readers but in order to shame political figures, sections of parties and indeed whole parties of which a newspaper disapproves. The political complexion of the British national press being what it is, Labour and Liberal Democrat politicians are particularly at risk of being fingered for allegedly scandalous behaviour, but because the Conservative press supports overwhelmingly the right wing of the party, Conservatives who are perceived as too socially liberal are also targets for shaming (*vide* Cameron again, who was never forgiven by papers such as the *Mail* for initiating the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act 2013). Third, the motive for running a scandalous story may be political in a different way, namely to discourage a government from enacting a particular policy. Thus the shaming of David Mellor was not exactly unconnected with the fact that he had recently told the press that its intrusive behaviour meant that it was ‘drinking in the last chance saloon’, and they feared (quite wrongly, in fact) that the government was thinking of bringing in a privacy law. The scandal was thus used by the press (a) to make it seem as if politicians were contemplating a law which would make it much more difficult for the press to reveal their transgressions; and (b) to demonstrate the fate that awaited at the hands of the press any politician who had the temerity to contemplate measures which might curb its power.

It is undoubtedly the case, though, that, as McRobbie and Thornton argue:

> The diversification of forms of media and the sophisticated restructuring of various categories of audience require that, while a consensual social morality might still be a political objective, the chances of it being delivered directly through the channels of the media are much less certain.

*(1995, 573)*

Since they wrote these words, the growth of the internet, and especially of social media, has made it far easier to challenge the stories which routinely circulate in Britain’s national newspapers, and in particular to show that many of the ‘scandals’ pedalled by them are in fact no such thing. Here websites and blogs such as Inforrm, Hacked Off, Zelo Street, Byline,
openDemocracy, The Conversation, SubScribe and many others have done a formidable counter-hegemonic job. But it would be extremely unwise to underestimate or downplay the power of the press when it comes to amplifying scandals for political or ideological purposes. As I have argued elsewhere, contra McRobbie and Thornton, the vast majority of the national press has remained resolutely closed, and indeed bleakly hostile, to the critical incursions of the new media (whilst, of course, eagerly amplifying, within the limits of the law, the scandal stories which originate there), the political effectivity (in Westminster/Whitehall terms) of the new media is questionable, and,

in terms of contemporary political reality, the inescapable fact is that . . . either politicians believe that the opinions expressed by the majority of newspapers do indeed reflect public opinion, or these are the opinions to which politicians are most highly sensitised and thus most liable to react to in policy terms. Consequently, what the public actually thinks counts for little.

(Petley 2013, 95)

‘Stoking the fires of hatred’

For all these reasons, then, what appears in significant sections of the British national press, and especially scandalmongering in the interests of shaming its ideological and political enemies, should be a matter of considerable public concern. By devoting so much space and journalistic energy to such material, not only do such papers marginalise within their own pages issues of real importance, or indeed banish them altogether, but they also significantly influence the broadcasting agenda, and particularly that of the BBC. As is becoming ever clearer, if a story, however tendentious, dominates the national newspaper agenda, it will inevitably work its way onto the broadcast agenda, notwithstanding the broadcasters’ statutory commitment to impartiality. *Mutatis mutandis*, if the bulk of the press ignores an important story, which it routinely does in the case of those which don’t fit its political/ideological agendas (such as the infringement of electoral law by certain Brexit-supporting groups in the run-up to the referendum), then it is highly liable to find itself sidelined by the broadcasters too. (An honourable exception being *Channel 4 News*.)

It really does have to be asked whether the shame-obsessed conception of journalism exemplified by, but by no means confined to, the *Mail* is desirable in a modern democratic society. In this chapter I have frequently stressed that Britain is now an extremely heterogeneous society in so many respects, but it also a very deeply divided one, and in the Brexit era it is becoming more riven by the day, although of course the vast bulk of national newspapers campaigned absolutely relentlessly for Brexit. In such a situation, constantly holding up to public shame and opprobrium certain groups of people, whether they be celebrities and politicians, or vulnerable Others such as immigrants, refugees, asylum seekers, Muslims, travellers or any of the other numerous folk devils in the press hall of shame, seriously risks exacerbating already raw social divisions and fuelling profound tensions which threaten to rip the social bonds asunder. As Andrew O’Hagan argued in a particularly pungent review of the book *Mail Men: The Unauthorised Story of the Daily Mail*:

Britain has become a place where a newspaper does best, in commercial terms, when it is stoking the fires of hatred. *Show me a hatred and I’ll top it; show me a foreigner and I’ll ban him; show me a need and I’ll cast doubt on it; bring me a sensitive problem and I’ll crush it.*

(2017, 13)
Peter Wilby (2014) followed a similar line in a *New Statesman* article about the *Mail*, although his remarks could apply equally well to the *Sun, Express, Star, Telegraph* and their Sunday counterparts,

The *Mail* gives its readers a sense of belonging in an increasingly complex and unsettling world. Part of the trick is to make the world seem more threatening than it is: crime is rising, migrants flooding the country, benefit scroungers swindling the taxpayer, standards of education falling, wind turbines taking over the countryside . . . The *Mail* assures its readers they are not alone in their anxieties about this changing world.

**Scandal sets the agenda**

This would matter far less if governments and political parties didn’t wake in fear each morning of what the *Mail* and *Sun* in particular have said about them, and if they didn’t simply read off ‘public opinion’ from right-wing newspaper editorialising. Confirmation that this is indeed the case was provided by the former Home Secretary Ken Clarke whilst testifying in 2017 to the Competition and Markets Authority Inquiry into the proposed merger of 21st Century Fox and Sky. Talking of the ‘rules’ which Blair and Cameron used to keep the press onside, he stated that:

One was if you want to win an election you have got to have the *Sun* and if you want to keep in power you have got to have the *Daily Mail*. Constant communication to the proprietors trying to get the editorial line switched to your party was a key part of the struggle of recent years. Great deals were done.

Speaking of the time when Theresa May was Home Secretary, he noted that ‘the Prime Minister, and Mrs May’s advisors, would tell her that she cannot possibly stop seeing those people. Gordon Brown used to prefer being on the phone to them all day’. In his view, politicians need to decide if it is really in the public interest for them to submit to

the constant campaigning, sometimes of a hysterical kind, which has such an influence on the politicians because they think it has such an influence on the public and they need to defer to the media proprietors whenever they can, particularly Murdoch, who is by far the most powerful.  

Or as David Cameron put it in the debate on 13 July 2011 in which he announced the establishment of the Leveson Inquiry: ‘The relationship [between government and the press] did get unhealthy. It was too close and . . . too much time was spent courting the media and not enough time was spent confronting the problems.

The political bias of the national press in Britain would also matter less if the BBC in particular among the broadcasters did not allow national newspapers to set its own news agenda. That it does indeed do so was confirmed in 2014 by Robert Peston, then the Corporation’s economics editor, who stated that he found ‘most frustrating’ the way in which BBC News ‘is completely obsessed by the agenda set by newspapers . . . If we think the *Mail* and *Telegraph* will lead with this, we should. It’s part of the culture’ (quoted in Brown and Deans 2014). But the most dire consequence of such a skewing of the agenda is that it contributes significantly to shaping the public’s perceptions of the society, and indeed of the world, in which they are living. For example, a survey conducted by Ipsos MORI in 2013 showed that out of every 100 people in Britain, respondents thought that 28 were single parents, whereas the actual figure is 3.
Similarly with Muslims (24 as opposed to 5), the unemployed (22 to 8), Black/Asian (32 to 11), and immigrants (31 to 13). Numerous other reliable surveys have produced similar findings. These are all groups that have repeatedly been the subject of scandalmongering and shaming in the press, and although one cannot of course prove that public perceptions are created by the press it would seem highly probable that, over the long term, endlessly repeated press stories about particular out-groups in society would have a degree of influence on public perceptions of and beliefs about them.

‘The age of contempt’

Of course, no-one would argue that the media should not scrutinise politicians in order to ensure that they are properly carrying out their democratic functions and to render them fully visible and accountable to the electorate. But when the stories disproportionately concern politicians of one particular party, then scandalmongering takes on a distinctly politically partisan complexion. And when a constant drip-feed of stories about political scandals, in which those genuinely in the public interest (MPs expenses and cash for questions, for example) endlessly rub shoulders with sheer character assassination (as in the case of Labour leaders Ed Miliband and Jeremy Corbyn) and often heavily confected stories about MPs personal lives which are quite irrelevant to their public duties, this is a potent symptom of what Steven Barnett has called ‘the age of contempt’, in which ‘a relentlessly negative approach to both politicians and politics itself’ has meant that ‘a line has been crossed from detached scepticism to derision, cynicism and ridicule’ (2002, 404–405). A similar point has been made by John Lloyd, who claims that the contemporary media default position is that ‘politics is a dirty game, played by devious people who tell an essentially false narrative about the world and thus deceive the British people’ (2004, 20). In Barnett’s view, what we have witnessed is ‘a coarsening of political reporting which is in danger of undermining respect for democratic institutions and actors, and therefore democracy itself’ (2002, 406). As an example of such journalism, he cites an editorial from the Sun, on 1 February 1999, which had just engaged in a particularly vicious bout of scandalmongering about various figures in the recently elected Labour government and was now warning it not to contemplate retaliation:

Too many politicians are sad, sordid, pathetic, inadequate wimps with private lives that make ordinary people’s stomachs churn. They are not fit to hold office. So, Mr Blair, get your tank off our lawn. Remember that we speak for millions of Brits who live cleaner lives than half of Westminster. We speak for the people who put you and your fornicating friends in power.

(Quoted in ibid., 405)

In the intervening years such reporting has only increased in quantity and its tone has become even more hectoring and vituperative. There are very strong parallels here with the manner in which in the USA Donald Trump and his supporters now habitually refer to the federal government as ‘the swamp’. There the ideological groundwork for this particularly virulent form of anti-political populism was laid for years by Fox News and the shock jocks of talk-radio, while on this side of the Atlantic it has been the work of much of the mainstream national press (although of course Rupert Murdoch is a common factor in both countries). In the UK this kind of journalism helped to galvanise the sentiments which reanimated UKIP, gave immense succour to the growing band of Tory ultras who loathe the EU and all its works, and ultimately played a key role in Brexit. Of course, it would be quite absurd to claim that all of this is entirely
due to ideologically and politically motivated scandalmongering on the part of papers such as the *Sun*, *Star*, *Mail*, *Express* and *Telegraph* but, there again, it would be equally foolish to argue that long-term scandalmongering and attempts at public shaming have played no role at all in those newspapers’ attempts to render certain politicians and certain policies beyond the ideological and political pale. Such scandals are frequently about utterly trivial matters, and many have the most tenuous relationship with the truth, but their consequences for all of us are about as far from trivial as it is possible to get.

**Notes**

1 Chapter 39 of Thomas Hardy’s 1884 novel *The Mayor of Casterbridge* features a skimmington ride, and a modern-day version occurs in a 2006 episode of the ITV series *Midsomer Murders* entitled ‘Four Funerals and a Wedding’.

2 For further details see http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/202525.stm.

3 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a169fe40f0b627df214222/politicians-transcript-hearing-011117.pdf

4 https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201011/cmhansrd/cm110713/debtext/110713-0001.htm

5 https://www.slideshare.net/IpsosMORI/ipsos-mori-great-britain-the-way-we-live-now

**References**


