MEDIA FINGERS IN THE SOCIAL POLICY PIE –
AND THE SEVEN SINS OF THE REPTILES

by

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Can I open by paying tribute and thanks to the warm hospitality and invigorating learning environment in Nuffield. I have had a wonderful two years – the first conducting 160 interviews in London with politicians, special advisers, civil servants, pressure group leaders and public service managers but interspersed with lunches, dinners, seminars and library browsing at Nuffield. And a second year in permanent residence from which I am still suffering withdrawal symptoms: no more regular high tables – not just the splendid food and conversation but made even better by Daniel Lawson’s stimulating selections from the 12,000 bottles in the College’s wine cellar; no more scouts, like my lovely Sybil, who after 25 years in the business understands an untidy study is a sign of creativity, not chaos; no more welcoming common room with all five serious papers laid out on the table outside and the satisfaction of seeing the Telegraph and Independent frequently unopened and unread compared to the Guardians and FTs spread around the room.

May I also just add for the benefit of the splendid turn out of policy-makers, pressure group leaders, media contacts and friends who may be unaware of the College’s history, that this has been an auspicious year for Nuffield: the 50th anniversary of the College receiving its royal charter, placing it on the same self-governing footing as the other 28 at the time. Nuffield chalked up several firsts when it began just before the Second World War: the first post graduate college; the first co-ed college (indeed the first fellow was a female); and the first specialist college with its focus on the social sciences. And a fourth innovation, which makes this non academic more comfortable in giving this lecture, was the desire of the founder to create a college where non academics would readily and regularly mix with the college’s academics to seek solutions to current day challenges facing society.

There is considerably more criticism than praise for journalism in this lecture. But before we get to the criticisms, I do want to pay tribute to the large number of serious journalists still out there, who with much expertise and wide knowledge of the fields they cover, do provide an invaluable public service. I remain proud of the traditions of my trade. I feel privileged to have been able to spend 38 of my 46 years in journalism on The Guardian as a roving reporter, leader-writer and social policy editor. I believe it is still producing some of the finest journalism in the country. They have been a wonderful team – highly intelligent, collegiate, and fun. Right up to the day of my retirement I was still driving into the office believing I should be paying them for the job. It has been an intriguing and uplifting experience watching the reaction of the new foreign members of the College to the paper – the continental friends seem genuinely impressed by the width of coverage, extent of analysis, and expertise in many commentaries, but rightly still somewhat shocked by some of the fluff and mickey mouse stories. Some of my German friends are still unconvinced by its design, use of graphics and pictures. But as someone who used to urge my paper “to dare to be dull”, I’ve become converted to our new style.

There are many different descriptions that can be applied to my trade. Nicholas Tomalin, the Sunday Times’s journalist killed in the Yom Kippur war, suggested “the qualities for success in journalism are rat-like cunning, a plausible manner and a little literary ability.” A crisper version that could be said to apply to the Sun states: make it juicy; make it brief; make it up.
joined the Guardian because I believed it sought a nobler cause: comforting the afflicted; afflicting the comfortable.

What prompted my study was the widening concern in the last decade over the increase in mainstream media power. Onora O’Neill, the philosopher, in her Reith lectures in 2002 spoke of the national press acquiring “unaccountable power that others cannot match”. Anthony Sampson in his fourth edition of Anatomy of Britain in 2004, Who Runs This Place?, showed just how entrenched that perception was. Returning to interview the leaders of 24 other centres of power – Whitehall, Westminster, City, Industry, Corporations, Cabinet, Treasury, political parties, academia, trade unions, defence, banks, accountants, etc – he noted that virtually every institution he had talked to complained of a weakening of their influence in the 40 years since his first edition and the growth in the same period of media power. John Lloyd followed up with his What the Media are Doing to Our Politics with an indictment of both broadsheet and broadcasting journalists for their sensationalism, distortions and exaggeration in the new “adversarial journalism”. And before all this, Martin Lynton, former Guardian journalist and holder of this Fellowship in 1995, documented in his “Was it the Sun wot won it?” the degree to which the Sun’s sustained daily distortions of Labour and Kinnock actions in the run up to the 1992 elections, could have persuaded sufficient numbers of its Labour voting readers to make a decisive switch to the Conservatives.

Concern about the media’s influence was not just confined to these observers. Editors too became involved. Richard Lambert, of the Financial Times, delivered a long lecture – printed in the Guardian – on the need for higher journalistic standards and more media accountability. Alan Rusbridger, Guardian editor, wrote to 50 people in high profile public service and private sector jobs asking them to evaluate the media coverage of their work. The responses ran to 26 pages, which were published in successive editions of the Guardian’s weekly media section in January 2005. The main concern of the respondents was the media’s persistent negativity and destructiveness. David Bell, the chief inspector of schools at the time, declared: “a lack of coverage of positive stories can create the impression that a system – in my case education – is in a perpetual state of crisis. This simply is not true.” Trevor Phillips, former journalist and chair of the Commission for Racial Equality, suggested “journalists do now seem to believe that the person in charge is always wrong.” Tony Wright, chair of the Commons Committee on Public Administration, in one of the most damning indictments, was unequivocal: “Newspapers trumpet the collapse of trust in politics and politicians, as though they had not had a major role in bringing it about. They nourish a culture of contempt engulfing the whole of public life. The trend is clear. As circulations fall, the race is to the bottom.”

Perhaps there could be no better acknowledgment of the increase in the media’s influence than the declaration by Tony Blair on his election as Labour leader in 1994, that “the only thing that matters now in this campaign is the media, the media, the media.” Compare that to Prime Minister Clement Attlee, who on returning to Downing Street in 1951 after obtaining the Queen’s consent to a general election, was asked by reporters whether he had a message for the nation and replied “no”. Even in the 1970s, ministerial interviews were still being
strictly rationed by their directors of information. Norman Warner, private secretary to Barbara Castle, Secretary of State for Health and Social Security in the 1970s, remembers his boss being told by her director of communications that she had already in one week done two broadcast interviews and that was enough. Compare that to Alastair Campbell’s guidance to new recruits to Tony Blair’s press office: “If we do not feed them, they eat us.”

There is nothing new about governments trying to manipulate the media. Churchill in the First World War declared governments should either “squash ’em or square ’em”. Charles Wintour, former Evening Standard editor, in his book on Pressure on the Press in 1972, suggested, “The attempt to squash ’em may have been dropped but the principle to square ’em is very much alive.” Ironically, for all Attlee’s reluctance to seize media opportunities, it was under his government that media communications became more professional. It has all been set out by Martin Moore, who is in the audience, in his fascinating book The Origins of Modern Spin. Perhaps it is worth remembering that even a government with post-war emergency economic powers that allowed it to ration the size of papers (4 to 6 pages), cap their circulations and even introduce distribution controls, was frustrated by a truculent press which with a few exceptions was not “properly informing the electorate” in the eyes of ministers.

But for all this media history, what Labour introduced in 1997 was new. Blair’s first appointment after becoming party leader was not a policy chief but a press chief. And he had to travel across France to persuade Alastair Campbell to become press director. Together with Peter Mandelson they created a formidable media machine complete with a computer-driven rebuttal unit, packed with stats and quotes that could provide instant responses to media or opposition criticisms. Thanks to the loss of confidence in the Major government and Labour’s assiduous wooing of national newspaper editors and their publishers, support for Labour was transformed. Whereas only three out of 10 national papers supported Labour in the 1992 election, six out of 10 supported it in 1997 with one (the Times) staying neutral and three others (Mail, Express, Telegraph) offering only lukewarm support to the Tories.

On victory the campaign media machine was taken into Downing Street. Senior media directors were replaced by more pro-active ones – 25 heads or deputy heads changed in the first year. Presentation of policy became as important as its creation. Policies were never knowingly undersold. They were pre-announced, announced, post-announced and re-announced. A coterie of sympathetic reporters was identified and favoured with leaks. Blair was the first prime minister to allow his media director to attend all cabinet meetings, the first to give his media director powers to instruct civil servants, the first to write regularly for the tabloids (150 articles in his first two years), and the first to have weekly sessions with his pollster. In its first four year term, the Blair administration issued 32,000 press releases.

As Martin Moore noted this year in an address to the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism in Oxford, when Prime Minister Baldwin first compared the press to a harlot (“power without responsibility”) there were 44 people in the government involved in some form of communication. Today there are over 3,000 press officers, 70 or so special advisers, huge departments of communication within each Whitehall ministry some occupying whole
floors, a Number 10 communication team, an advertising budget of over £230 million and 950 government websites. Surely that evens things up a bit?

Initially there was immense goodwill for the new Labour government. Senior civil servants in the early days conceded Whitehall’s communication system did need reform. But over time relations turned sour. It was a combination of spin, too much manipulation, too much favouritism to selected journalists, the needs of 24/7 news, the “tyranny of momentum politics” (as Peter Hyman, Blair’s chief speech writer and head of strategic communications aptly named it), along with Iraq and dodgy dossiers. The emphasis on presentation pushed ministers into “headline policy making”. One head of communications at health complained of Number 10 “asking for announcements before we have policies”. Indeed when things were getting tough in 2000, they were made worse by the leak of a Blair memo to his aides asking for some “headline grabbing initiative” on touchstone issues which would change public perceptions. Even worse was a later email that followed a meeting with his pollster in which Blair complained the government “was out of touch with gut British instincts”, and where he said he wanted to be “personally associated” with “tough measures”.

My project has been to look at seven social policy decisions teasing out the influence of the media. I know policy making is a complex process, a mix of new events, old promises, bureaucratic loyalties, party allegiances, manifesto pledges, pressure group campaigns, think tank or select committee reports, research findings, and legislative cooking time among other factors. I do not want to exaggerate the media’s role but it does play a part. My case studies span a wide cross section of social policy. In terms of media influence they are on a spectrum. At one extreme is the prime minister’s decision to cut asylum numbers in half in 2003 in breach of the Geneva convention – a decision which all the people I interviewed conceded was media driven. At the other, is the decision to seek to abolish child poverty by 2020, an issue on which there was no media pressure – unless you regard Guardian editorials and columns by Polly Toynbee, rightly voted by a poll of commentators as the most influential, as media pressure which they are not. Media pressure is front page splashes day after day.

This is not intended to be an academic treatise. It is a look at the media’s influence on policy making in the field of social affairs as observed by a journalist over the last 40 years along with my interviews and reading in the last two. In my book the case studies, which are mostly drawn from the last 10 years, will be used as a peg to look at earlier events too. I can only give you a taste of what I have found in this lecture. So here goes.

**ASYLUM:**

To take Asylum first. There were a mere six lines on asylum/immigration in Labour’s 1997 manifesto. But then in 1997 asylum was way down the list of public concern. Only 3% of people polled put it into their top three concerns. And in the next three years it was never higher than 10%. But as the numbers climbed so did tabloid interest. And so did public concern. By the end of 2002 applications had risen from 32,000 in 1997 to 84,000. This still kept the UK well down the EU league in terms of applicants per head of population. Five
other states by this criterion were absorbing more. But a look at the jostling between the tabloids to be the most pernicious will illustrate why the public came to have such a distorted picture. One opinion survey in 2003 showed the British public believed the UK was receiving 23% of the world’s refugees. In reality, the entire European Union was only accepting 3%.12

Once upon a time tabloids used to target welfare scroungers, but now they could concentrate on a better target: asylum seekers, who were both poor and foreign. Two different sets of context analysis of national papers by academics have shown systemic distortions by the tabloids. Here are a few examples, which fall outside the dates covered, providing a taste. There was the Sun’s totally fictitious three page exclusive on “Sun Bake”: asylum seekers who were catching, killing, cooking and consuming the Queen’s swans, on whom a top Scotland Yard team was due to pounce.13 Scotland Yard denied the entire story, but it took the Sun another six months before it printed a mere 60-word “clarification”, tucked away at the back of the paper with no apology. The Sun’s leader on the day of the three page splash would have been better directed at its own behaviour. It declared: “This sickening behaviour is an insult to our nation’s civilised traditions....if they want to behave like savages, let them get back where they came from.” In the meantime the Star followed up the Sun with an equally damning fabricated story of asylum seekers from Somalia rustling donkeys from Greenwich Park in order to eat them.14 The Express ran a splash alleging that police had arrested two Lithuanian asylum seekers linked to al-Qaeda, who were plotting to kill the prime minister.15 Senior police were so outraged by the falsity of the story that they issued an unequivocal denial calling it “rubbish” and pointing out that the Express reporters had been told in advance that “no security issues were raised by their arrest”.

In a paper prepared for the Institute of Public Policy Research on May 30, 2005, Roy Greenslade, former Sunday Times news editor, Daily Mirror editor and Guardian media commentator, noted the false links to violent crime and disease with which asylum seekers had been linked. He went on: “There is hardly a social ill – welfare-scrounging, council house queue-jumping, prostitution, working in the black economy – that has not been laid at their door.”16 A survey of the content in seven national dailies over a 12 week period at the end of 2002 revealed the “winners” as the Mail and Express. A second survey the following year revealed that in one 31-day period in 2003, the Express ran 22 front pages about asylum seekers, becoming fixated on the so-called “crisis”. Many rested on statistics from unofficial sources that were no more than guesstimates. They had discovered it sold papers. When journalists on the Express complained to the Press Complaints Commission about the campaign, they were told by the feeble body that the issue could not be examined because the journalists were not victims, the asylum seekers were.

Ministers concede tabloid bile played an important role. But they also pointed to the powerful images projected by television coverage of Sangatte, the refuge camp just outside Calais, from which refugees were desperately trying to jump on and cling to Euro trains before they entered the channel tunnel. “It seemed to run night after night on the news” one weary minister told me. The numbers were small, but the pictures dramatic. It was not resolved until David Blunkett negotiated the closure of the camp. Not surprisingly, public concern rose to 27% in 2001 and 39% in 2002.
Tony Blair’s announcement to halve asylum numbers came in the spring of 2003, when it was already clear – but not published – that asylum numbers were dropping dramatically by provisions that had come into operation in 2002. He selected October 2002, knowing that was the peak and by August 2004 numbers had not just halved but been cut by 70%. Even this, of course, neither satisfied the Conservative opposition nor the right-wing anti-immigration lobby group Migration watch, which dismissed the figures, even though they had been independently audited, as “another spin”.

An intriguing study by Mori on the attitudes of newspaper readers (“You Are What You Read” by Bobby Duffy and Laura Rowden, 2005) concluded that of all issues examined, the one on which the press had the biggest impact was immigration and race relations. While over 40% of Sun, 46% of Mail and 48% of Express readers in 2004 Mori surveys placed immigration and race as the most important issue facing Britain, less than half this concern was found in readers of the Independent (20%) and Guardian (19%).

What lessons can be drawn from this case? The most important is that it is easier for the media to change policy if the government does not have a clear policy itself. Sarah Spencer, Associate Director of Oxford’s Centre on Migration, produced an excellent study of Labour’s asylum and immigration policies in its first 10 years in Blair’s Britain 1997-2007 edited by Anthony Seldon. She rightly notes that in the early years there was no clear policy at all – “no vision, no policy goals, no third way”. Once forced to engage by the media and opposition parties in 2003, Downing Street sources told her that with the exception of Iraq, there was no subject which took as much of his time – 50 meetings some lasting three hours over two years. Blair’s overriding objective was to convince the public that asylum and immigration were under control and to neutralise the issue. She rightly concludes that in this he undoubtedly failed, with polls showing concern rising throughout his period in office. Factors which only helped to reinforce concern, were the tough rhetoric and six separate asylum/immigration acts in the 10 years, which were meant to reassure but did the opposite. This story is repeated even more forcefully in the law and order case study below.

POVERTY:

Tony Blair’s declaration in London’s Toynbee Hall on March 16, 1999, remains London’s boldest social goal: the abolition of child poverty within 20 years. It came out of the blue from a Prime Minister, who had been mocked for the modesty of his party’s five pledges on which his party had campaigned in the 1997 election. As the Independent’s Andrew Marr noted, the only radical element of Labour’s manifesto was “the modesty of the pledges”.

But there was no disputing the radicalism of the Toynbee Hall pledge. A succession of research reports – both before and after the pledge – from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and the Institute for Fiscal Studies documented just how daunting the challenge would be. Labour inherited a society in which child poverty had tripled – from 1 in 9 to 1 in 3 children – during the Thatcher/Major years leaving 4.3 million children living below the poverty level (in households with incomes below 60% of the median after housing costs). What happened in the 1980s was an abrupt reversal of a three decade long trend in which inequality
narrowed. By 1979, both income inequality and relative poverty in Britain were at or near their lowest levels. What followed was the most brutal reversal of all countries in the world except New Zealand. By 1999, when Tony Blair issued his pledge, only the US had a worse poverty rate. One in five families had no one in work, four times the rate of 1968.

The speech was prompted by an invitation from Lord (Robin) Butler, former Cabinet Secretary who had become Master of University College. The Prime Minister was asked to open a series of lectures celebrating the College’s 750th anniversary. The first was to be “Beveridge Revisited – a welfare state fit for the 21st century”. There were numerous links: William Beveridge was Master of University College when he wrote his famous 1942 report. He was assisted by Harold Wilson, then a Fellow of University College and later Labour Prime Minister, and the report was implemented under Clement Attlee, an old member of the College.

There was extensive preparatory work. Leading social policy specialists were invited to submit papers to Number 10. Those, along with others in response to the speech are brought together in an excellent book Ending Child Poverty. Its editor, Robert Walker, along with several other authors of the papers – David Piachaud, Tony Atkinson, Peter Golding – are here tonight. Polly Toynbee would have been but was trapped in London by her column.

There were several fascinating aspects with the speech. He did use the “p” word and put poverty back on the agenda. Remember the use of the word poverty had been banned in the Thatcher/Major era. The same had happened in America where Feifer drew a brilliant cartoon: it showed two down and outs philosophising: “we used to be poor, then disadvantaged, then deprived, then discriminated against, then socially excluded. We have not got any more money, but we do have a lot of labels.”

Blair set reformers a tough challenge. How to transform welfare from “a term of abuse” into something popular, a necessary precondition in the Prime Minister’s view for achieving the goal. In fact he had done half the work for them by concentrating on child poverty. It was clever politics. It signalled to his critics on the left that New Labour still had Old Labour values. Equally important, it allowed some redistribution to be introduced in a less threatening way to middle income voters. Who could oppose helping poor children? Yet in helping poor children Labour would also be helping poor parents. At the same time it did not cut across the government’s belief that tackling unemployment was the key to tackling inequality.

But from where did the idea of “abolishing” child poverty come? No country has achieved this, not even the Scandinavians although they have come close. I’ve talked to the speech writer, Peter Hyman, the researcher and special adviser, Carey Oppenheim, and sundry others but none can remember. One former Treasury official thinks he knows. The speech was leaked by Alastair Campbell to the Mirror the night before it was given. It needed a front page splash. How do you get that? By declaring the boldest of goals. It certainly got a splash. And if you read the speech, the Treasury hypothesis is strengthened. If you are going to issue such an audacious target, surely in a normal speech you would not put it in the first two
paragraphs but build up the argument and make it the climax. But if you are trying to convince a tabloid about a good exclusive, then it is better to put it on page one than bury it on page 15.

Given the scale of what was being attempted, the media reaction was subdued. None of the nationals had it on their front page, although the Mirror scoop might have been a factor there. The story was already a day old. With the exception of a Daily Telegraph comment piece (“All things being equal, he’s a socialist”) and an ill-informed and jejune rant by Auberon Waugh in the Sunday Telegraph, it was not hostile. There were only two column inches in the Sun and the Star and only four inches in the Independent. But there were 22 inches in the FT, 42 in the Times, 62 in Telegraph and 73 in The Guardian, which also devoted two pages in the next issue of its Society section. Television was much worse. It got a fourth item of two minutes on ITN at 6.30 but nothing on the BBC main news at 9 o’clock nor on BBC2 Newsnight. Poverty, as Peter Golding an early media monitor of social policy coverage has noted, is not a story.

Two months later a smaller welfare story got many times the coverage. Why? Because it involved a political row. Politics always receives much more coverage in the media than policy. Labour’s move to change the eligibility rules for disability benefits led to a Labour rebellion which got day by day coverage.

Two last points. One negative, one positive. Although there was little media pressure pushing the reform and little hostility to its announcement, fear of the right-wing media still had a malign influence. The programme was launched but never properly promoted. There were no further big speeches about it in the months that followed and only one mention of it in the 2001 election campaign. Yet when it was launched there was still strong popular support for creating a fairer Britain. If the government had urged its supporters to build up a coalition behind the campaign – as it did later with the international Make Poverty History campaign – more might have been achieved. Instead, with the government desperately keen to keep the centre and the liberal right in its big tent, caution and circumspection won for fear of scaring right-wing horses.

Second, whatever prompted the declaration of such a daunting plan, its boldness helped ensure poverty was properly defined, tough targets set, and progress along with setbacks regularly reported as target dates were being passed.

DRUGS:

The rejection of the Runciman report on the restructuring of the 1971 Misuse of Drugs Act is a fascinating example of how ministers can sometimes misjudge what the media will do. There are numerous examples in the fields of asylum, crime, and drugs of ministers behaving like Murdoch editors – not needing to be told what to do by the tabloids because they already know what is wanted. As Roy Greenslade, noted in Druglink, the bimonthly journal that tracks drug treatment and legal developments: “It is impossible to analyse why media coverage of drugs has been so wayward unless we understand the inter-relationship between press, police, politicians – they feed off each other creating myths, rather than informing the
public about reality.” In rejecting the Runciman report ministers got it gloriously wrong. For once the media did not behave as ministers could have expected.

The driving force behind the report was the Police Foundation, an independent research body set up to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the police. Its director, Barrie Irving, had observed how much police time on drugs was being consumed – 75% – on one of the least dangerous drugs: cannabis. Worse still, the vast majority of that time was on users – including four million young people – not pushers. The Foundation, with the help of eight other charities, created what was in effect the royal commission that successive governments had been too wary to set up. Viscountess Runciman was the ideal chair, having chaired both the Mental Health Commission and the government’s Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs. The other 12 members were as distinguished in their separate fields as a royal commission could have wanted: policing (two chief constables), law (both a QC who had written the definitive work on drug offences, and a solicitor), pharmacology (the leading practitioner in the field), a former editor of The Times, a Cambridge philosopher, drug treatment and mental health workers, an inner city college principal, economist, sociologist.

A central purpose of the 1971 Act was the creation of three different categories of drugs in order of their harmfulness, but almost 30 years on the report found the categories no longer reflected modern scientific, medical, or sociological evidence. It rejected legalisation of drugs but called for radical changes to the classifications along with a much less punitive approach to possession and a more effective punitive approach to supply. The committee drew up a set of criteria by which objective assessments of relative harm could be measured. These were: addiction potential, toxicity, risk of overdose, longer-term risk to life and health, potential for injecting, association with crime, association with problems for communities, and public health costs.

At the end of 30 months work Lady Runciman, accompanied by Dr Irving, went to the Home Office and handed it over to Jack Straw, Home Secretary, and Mo Mowlan, the drugs minister. They were met with a bleak rejection by Jack Straw, who said it could not be accepted. There was a more sympathetic hearing from Mo Mowlam, who commented: “Don’t you think you should read it first Jack.” But the government, which had had its own intense internal debate on the issue, was not waiting for that. They got their retaliation in first in the Sunday papers before the report was released on the Monday: “Pleas for softer drug laws will be thrown out” (Express), “Police advice will fall on deaf ears” (Observer). Charles Clarke on Sunday morning TV declared: “There will be no weakening of the penalties for possession because that would send a signal of ‘taking drugs is okay’.”

But a sign of what was to come was found in the Mail on Sunday, until then one of the most vociferous supporters of tough action on drug use. It had seen a look of the report and insisted it “bows to no one in its vehement condemnation of the misuse of drugs” but went on to note that British teenagers headed the European league table for experimenting with them; that more than 4 out of 10 under 16s used cannabis; that Holland where cannabis was partially legal had fewer such users of cannabis; adding “the depressing conclusion must be that the current regime of anti drug laws and enforcement is failing.”
More media support followed publication. London’s Evening Standard in an editorial headlined “Now let’s have a proper debate” declared: “Lady Runciman must be right in arguing that education and treatment are more effective in curbing drug abuse than punishment.” The Guardian and Independent, as expected, endorsed the report. The Mirror insisted it should be “discussed intelligently and with an open mind.” The Express rapped ministers’ knuckles saying “knee jerk reactions won’t help the police”. The Daily Mail followed the lead of the Mail on Sunday. It placed an extract of its editorial bang in the middle of its front page: “Despite this paper’s instinctive reservations over a more relaxed approach to drugs, we believe the issue deserves mature and rational debate.” Most dramatic of all, the Telegraph went further than the report and suggested the government should draw up plans for legalising cannabis on a trial basis.

Straw back-tracked. A liberal leak to the Observer suggested he believed there was an argument for down grading ecstasy from A to B, while in a column for the more hard-line News of the World, he insisted cannabis would not be downgraded. In fact, as some of you will know, Straw’s successor, David Blunkett, downgraded cannabis from B to C without there being any increase in its use. Alas, it did not stop there for long, with Gordon Brown on his appointment as prime minister signalling he intended to upgrade it back to B. If only he had read the Mail on Sunday’s editorial at the time of Runciman he might not have made such a move.

HOUSING:

Here is a good example of how governments can still dictate the media’s agenda. As housing fell further and further down successive government agendas, so did the media lose interest in reporting what was happening. Four decades ago when there were fewer specialist posts, housing was a prized post for an ambitious journalist. Yet well over a decade ago there were none left in the main news rooms of the national press. It was left to city and personal finance journalists to report on the growing wealth of home owners. Social housing dropped out of sight despite the millions living there. In Margaret Thatcher’s first eight years in office 350,000 council homes were built; in Tony Blair’s first eight years just 3,500. True Blair was only following what Thatcher had started. And true there was a sharp shift to housing associations plus a big investment in renovations to bring the current stock up to decent standards. But, even so, there was a less well known but equally bold anti-poverty pledge by Labour, directly involving housing: “within 10 to 20 years no one should be seriously disadvantaged by where they live.” In the first eight years of the Blair government public expenditure on social housing was below even the early 1990s; less than half the 1970s; and two-third less than the 1960s.

Almost five years into the New Labour government a much-quoted Joseph Rowntree Foundation study in March 2002, produced an astounding statistic: the completion rate of public and private housing had reached its lowest point (outside the Second-World-War years) since 1924. It went on to set out a catalogue of grim facts, which would have been better known in the days of fulltime housing reporters: the gap between demand and supply was widening by as much as 56,000 a year; unless the current rate of building was
dramatically increased, there would be a shortfall of a million homes by 2022; while London and the South accounted for 70% of rising demand, only 50% of new homes were being built there.

Important stories were being given only the most superficial coverage. There were far too few reports on stock transfers to housing associations, which the Public Accounts Committee reported were bad value for taxpayers; too little coverage of the Treasury squeeze on new council homes, described as “perverse” by the Audit Commission and “dogmatic” in a report from the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister. There was too little attention to the rise of the suburbs or to the emergence of the anti-housing lobby, led by the Campaign to Protect Rural England, which remained mulishly in denial of housing needs. Another lobby, which failed to be pricked, was the self-interested campaign against house improvement packs (hips) by estate agents and surveyors. Hips, which were backed by the Consumers Association, were designed to save house purchasers having to commission a succession of surveys of different houses they were interested in. They made sense but the opponents got nine times as much coverage.

To his credit Gordon Brown, when he took over at Number 10, did recognise the need for a vast increase in new housing only for sub prime mortgages to implode and the credit crunch squeeze all life out of his expanded housing plan.

EDUCATION:

This case study will look at how the Tomlinson report into the education of 14 to 19-year olds came to be ditched. Its remit included the most serious problem facing secondary education: alienated young people who at 14 cannot engage with a school curriculum, too dominated by academic needs – while at 16 an alphabet soup of vocational courses (up to 5,000) left pupils, schools and employers totally confused. When the committee’s interim report was published in February 2004, its chairman, Sir Mike Tomlinson, signalled his hopes of bridging the historic and damaging divide between academic and vocational education that progressives had struggled to end for over 150 years. The responses to the interim report from all parties – state and private schools, teachers, headteachers, universities, leading employers, both opposition parties – were welcoming and supportive.

When the final report was published in October 2004, there were no surprises in either content or timing. Reassuringly it called for “evolution not revolution”. The government which provided the secretariat knew well in advance what it was going to produce. Indeed it had steered the process from the outset with a green paper. And it was in line with David Milliband, the Schools Minister, who had campaigned for such reforms for more than a decade. Yet it was vetoed. Why? A mixture of politics and the media. An election was only six months or so away. The Tories, who initially had been sympathetic, broke rank. They had been shown an early copy of the report to keep them on side, but instead, even before publication, Michael Howard, the Tory leader came out declaring the plan meant ditching “our gold standard A-levels” and GCSEs at 16. It didn’t. It made clear this was only an option. But the Mail and Telegraph had campaigned on this front. Tony Blair stepped in with
his veto and an echo of Howard’s criticisms. Milliband was perceived to have got too close to the department. The department’s secretary of state, Ruth Kelly, had only just recently moved into the seat and did not have the clout of her predecessors.

I got a call on the day of publication from Milliband. What was I going to say in the paper’s editorial the following day. I had only just begun writing so I read out what I had written: “There was concern yesterday that the government would ‘cherry pick’ the Tomlinson report. They haven’t. They have chopped down the cherry tree.” He protested but only half heartedly. He knew I knew how much he had pushed for this reform.

HEALTH:

This case became known to health service watchers as the most expensive breakfast in history. It involves Tony Blair’s pledge on the sofa of the Sunday morning television show “Breakfast with Frost” on January 16, 2000, that the UK spending on health would meet the European Union average within five years. This is perhaps the most common form of media influence: cases in which a continuous run of bad but genuine news stories, push politicians into a position they were going ultimately to take, though probably not as promptly or as generously, because of the public fuss generated by newspapers and broadcasters.

The Blair pledge came at the end of a troublesome year for the NHS in 1999. Two years of pursuing Tory spending limits – as Labour had pledged itself to do – had hit the NHS hard. It had, in fact, got slightly more than the limits, as the Tories would have done too, but not nearly enough. The financial squeeze on the service allied by Conservative suggestions that other forms of funding in place of taxation should be found for the NHS, left only three national dailies (the Guardian, Financial Times and Mirror) still believing a tax-funded health service was the most efficient by the Autumn of 1999. The others had switched to a juicier-looking apple in the continental orchard: social insurance, ignoring the fact that some of these models were already discussing, and one even switching, to a tax-based system. The supporters of a tax-based system were later upheld and vindicated in detail by the Wanless committee, which at the Treasury’s request, examined alternative forms of finance.

The news columns in the second half of 1999 were filled by stories of critical bed shortages, long trolley waits, cancelled waiting list operations, a threatened flu out-break, a pressure group report on elderly patients being starved and an East Anglian hospital being forced to hire a freezer truck because its morgue was full. The BBC had an “NHS crisis” logo running above its NHS bad news stories. Then two individual cases, always more powerful in media terms because they humanise dry statistical returns, broke. First came Mrs Mavis Skeet, a brave 78-year-old lady with throat cancer, who had four successive planned operations cancelled and by the fifth opportunity the tumour was so large and the patient so weak, it was too late to operate. There was widespread coverage of her plight.

The second individual case broke in the new year after a Christmas week in which a grave shortage of critical care beds had been prominent. The second case began when the 87-year-old mother of the best known doctor in Britain, Lord Winston, had to go into hospital. Lord Winston was not just a leading infertility specialist who appeared regularly on TV and radio
medical programmes, he was also a Labour peer and known to be on friendly terms with the Blairs. Unfortunately the treatment his mother received was abysmal, so bad in fact that Lord Winston gave a searing interview to the New Statesman. He spoke of her 13-hour trolley wait in casualty before transfer to a mixed sex ward where drugs were not given on time, meals were missed, and one night she had fallen out of bed and not been found until the morning staff came on, by which time she had caught an infection. He described such a catalogue of failure as “normal” and added “the terrifying thing is they accept it!” He accused Labour of being deceitful over abolishing the internal market and claimed UK funding was not as good as Poland’s.

The story was picked up and splashed in the Friday and Saturday editions and followed up in the Sundays. Although not all Winston’s facts were right he won the support of the Presidents of the two most eminent and powerful royal colleges – the physicians and the surgeons. And it was on that Sunday that the Prime Minister went to his long pre-arranged David Frost interview. Frost told me at that point in the political cycle he was getting two interviews a year with Blair and had not expected anything momentous, but in fact there had been media speculation and the crisis in the health service was the top item.

There are two versions of what happened on the show. Nic Timmins, the Financial Times reporter, in his excellent biography of the welfare state The Five Giants, suggests it was a bounce by Blair (egged on by Alan Milburn, the health secretary) on Brown. With the NHS due to celebrate its 50th birthday, there had been hints from Milburn and Blair that the NHS would receive “lots of money” in the government’s second comprehensive spending review. There was still a lingering embarrassment over the first three-year comprehensive spending review (CSR), which at its launch in 1998 Gordon Brown had aggregated the increases in health spending over the three years to a grossly exaggerated £21billion. It would have meant a 50% increase in spending when the rise in real terms was only 5% a year. It had initially been welcomed with awe by health managers (“beyond our wildest dreams” said their leader, Stephen Thornton), but then with anger when the deception was exposed.

The negotiations on the second CSR had not been completed when Blair met Frost. No final decision had been made on health spending but it was fait accompli by the end of the interview. A specific pledge had been made, not on a Downing Street sofa but publicly on a TV studio sofa. There was an initial rushing round on the precise words used but both Number 10’s health adviser, Robert Hill, and the health secretary’s adviser, Simon Stevens, were at their desks to advise journalists on its implications. The Chancellor’s aides were not.

Clive Smee, the respected chief economist at the Health Department, believes it could not have been that well planned. He was at his home at midday when he received a call from Number 10 asking how much extra per year would be needed to reach the European average within five years. Fortunately for Downing Street his eldest daughter’s boy friend had come to lunch with a compound interest function on his calculator that allowed them to make the complicated calculations needed for the press release that Number 10 was sending out. There were many to-and-fro conference calls with on duty Treasury officials asking if their boss was on board and Number 10 declaring it was now a public pledge. A furious Brown was
reported to have barged into 10 Downing St the next day accusing Blair of stealing his “f...ing budget”. But in his spring budget, pre-empting his second CSR that was not due until July, Brown announced NHS spending would rise on average by 6% a year for five years in real terms – double the real terms average of the previous 20 years, providing over the five years from 1999 a cash increase of 50% and a real terms rise of a third.

LAW AND ORDER:

Disentangling the labyrinthine links between politicians and press in the field of law and order is difficult, but in the last 15 years the fault for the rise in penal populism can be laid more fairly at the feet of politicians than the press. As professors Rod Morgan (who is here in the audience) and David Downes have suggested, for the first 70 years of the 20th century law and order was not a partisan issue. It was recognised to be a difficult and complicated issue that was best left to the professionals in the field and experts in the Home Office. Morgan and Downes studied all the party manifestos post Second World War and found there was no mention until the 1970 election. Even then it was only raised in the briefest and most genteel way. The Conservative manifesto suggested “the (1964-70) Labour government cannot entirely shrug off responsibility for rising crime and violence.” Labour responded with shock and horror that the Conservatives had sought to “exploit for party political ends the issue of crime and law enforcement.” Compare that to the rhetoric of the last three decades.

The politicisation of crime control did not really start in the UK until the run up to the 1979 election when Margaret Thatcher, as the Conservative opposition leader, openly and persistently blamed Labour for rising crime and disorder. Her promises for higher police numbers, much better pay and tougher penal policies helped define clear blue water between the two main parties. In their book on the 1979 election, Butler and Kavanagh suggested that Thatcher’s use of tough law and order messages was one of the main drivers of her electoral success. Prior to the election she used the civil labour disputes in the 1978/79 Winter of Discontent (hospital picket lines, uncleared rubbish, disrupted transport) to reinforce her claims that Labour was soft on law and order and following her victory consolidated this position in the 1981 Brixton/Toxteth urban disorders and the breaches of pickets laws during the 1984 miners’ strike.

It was this loss of public confidence in Labour that prompted Tony Blair to seek to seize the law and order crown. After Labour’s surprise defeat in the 1992 election, Blair specifically asked the new Labour leader, John Smith, for the shadow home affairs post. A huge increase in crime (more than double) in the Tory’s first three terms and the grim death of Jamie Bulger, a Liverpool toddler killed by two young boys in 1993, provided him with powerful ammunition to attack the Thatcher/Major record. His new mantra “tough on crime, tough on the causes of crime” – a rallying cry originally scripted by Gordon Brown – won him early headlines. All this was in place before Michael “Prison Works” Howard became Home Secretary and engaged in an epic battle with Blair over who could be the toughest. A former senior civil servant in Howard’s office told me how amazed they were, as he ratcheted up his proposals in the run-up to the 1997 election, that all were accepted by Blair, by then Labour
leader, including the draconian 1997 Sentencing Act, with its “two strikes and you are in” prison provision. Passed by Howard, implemented by Blair.34

The campaign did not stop once Blair had won office. He talked endlessly and inappropriately of the need to replace a 19th century criminal justice system with a 21st century model. He called for a victim justice system, ignoring the fact that a main driver behind setting up a justice system was to end blood feuds and lynch law. He held 13 criminal summits in his first five years, passed 53 crime acts creating 3,000 new offences in his 10 years, as though this was the key to crime control when in reality only two out of every 100 offences ever gets to court. But tougher acts – and tougher rhetoric – lead to longer sentences for a much wider range of offences. It took four decades between 1951 and 1991 for the prison population to rise by 11,000. Between 1992 and 2002 during the Blair-Howard law and order wars, the population went up by 22,000 – twice as fast in one quarter of the time. Successive chief inspectors of prison along with successive directors of the prison service all complained about the number of inappropriate offenders inside: young people, non violent offenders, the mentally ill.

By the time Blair got to Number 10, England and Wales already had more people in prison per head of population than some of the most hardline states – Burma, Saudi Arabia, China – but he insisted on expanding the prison building programme. The 22,000 extra prisoners that have arrived under Labour cost £41,000 a year each in accommodation plus £100,000 in capital for each extra cell. We are now spending a greater proportion of our GDP on the criminal justice system – 2.5% – not just more than any other EU state but the US as well. A further 10,500 places are planned by 2014 including three Titan warehouses holding up to 3,000 each. Crime has been falling for 13 years – burglary, car crime, and theft are all over 50% down – but according to the Prime Minister’s strategy unit only 5% of the fall is due to prison. Other factors include greater economic stability, better security of cars and homes, falls in the value of electrical goods, sharper police focus on persistent offenders, and more investment in drug schemes.

The irony of Blair’s penal populism is that it has not worked. The main results of his tough rhetoric, hyperactivity and continuous criticism of the criminal justice system is that the public believes everything is going wrong. A recent survey has shown two thirds of the public wrongly believe that crime is still going up and blame the government; one third rightly believed it was going down, but gave the government no credit for this fall. What politicians should pay more heed to is a second finding of the same survey: people who are best-informed have the least anxiety; those who are most ill-informed, are the most anxious. Education works.

There are then three key “offenders” in this field: Margaret Thatcher, Tony Blair and Michael Howard who bear a bigger responsibility than the tabloids for ratcheting up to ludicrous levels of penal punitivism.
And so to the seven sins. They are a mixture of old and new. But even the old are now perpetrated in a much more pernicious and malign manner generating deeper and more damaging wounds to the democratic process. Let us start with an old sin:

**SIN ONE: DISTORTION**

This can be brief. There have been plenty of examples already: asylum, crime, drugs. Is it any wonder that the 2002 survey by Amnesty found the public believing the UK was absorbing 25% of the world’s refugees when the entire EU was only taking 3%? Day after day, the first sub clause of clause one in the Press Complaints Commission’s Code of Conduct, drawn up by editors, is breached: “The press must take care not to publish inaccurate, misleading or distorted information, including pictures.” And after almost all of these breaches (think of the Sun’s swan bake or the false links by the Express of the two arrested Lithuanian asylum seekers to al-Qaeda) sub clause two of the first clause is ignored too: “A significant inaccuracy, misleading statement or distortions once recognised must be corrected, promptly and with due prominence, and – where appropriate – an apology published.”

There was a cringe-making example of the distortion of crime statistics on Steve Hewlett’s BBC Radio 4 programme, the Media Show, on September 29, 2008. It examined how the latest crime statistics – including the first knife crime figures – had been reported. The Telegraph Home Affairs Editor, Christopher Hope, was put under scrutiny for downplaying the fall in violent crime and for suggesting that knife crime had spread from city to town and village. They could not show a trend because they had not been collected before. He replied: “The problem with the official police record statistics, as opposed to the British Crime Survey figures, is that they do not reflect what our readers see on the streets every day. You can try and cut it any way you want. We try and get a picture which reflects what our readers are seeing every day....some of us would say, our readers see this lawless Britain in some part of their life, they do not want to be told by the government that violent crime is falling.” Mori surveys in 2004 found the public placed crime as the fifth most important issue facing the country. It reported, “Telegraph readers are most concerned at 27% (despite being more likely to live in the relatively low crime East and South East), with Guardian readers least concerned 15% (despite the fact that a third of all Guardian readers live in higher crime London).”

There is another good example of how scapegoat reporting – tabloids on their scrounger bashing beat – can distort public perceptions set out in British Social Attitudes with respect to welfare. Opinion surveys found there was widespread recognition that social security benefits were now the biggest item in public expenditure, but gave completely wrong perceptions on how this was spent. The public believed 44% of social security spending went on the unemployed when it was only 6%; 13% on one-parent families when it was less than 1%. Few recognised the biggest beneficiaries were pensioners accounting for over 50%.

There is an equally interesting study on public perceptions on health conducted by Ipsos MORI for the NHS Confederation, the health management body, in 2006. Ask the public
for their sense of satisfaction with respect to NHS services and the returns are low with one exception: inpatient services (47%), outpatient (54%), walk-in centres (30%), NHS Direct (36%). The exception is GP services, which get 80%. Why is this? This is the one service most of the public will have visited so they can use their own experience. For the other services, the public has to rely on media reports and hearsay. Ask patients what satisfaction they experienced with the same group of services and the answers are always 33% higher and sometimes twice as high with the exception of GPs: inpatient (74%), outpatient (70%), walk-in centres (69%), NHS Direct (71%). GPs scored 81%, but as explained above, that was almost identical to the public’s.

**Sin Two: Dumbing Down**

A new and dispiriting broadsheet sin, already occurring before the advent of tabloid sized papers, but accelerating since. It needn’t have happened as Le Monde among others demonstrates. But it has. The BBC’s Andrew Marr has noted how celebrity journalism has infected current affairs with political reporters concentrating on the human drama of who is “up” and who “down” to the exclusion of context and detail.37

But it is more serious than that. In a lecture on ‘What Are Newspapers for?’ in 2005, the Guardian’s editor, Alan Rusbridger, broke the dog does not eat dog rule of journalism with a blunt analysis of what was happening to newspapers. It ranged over the Sun’s abandonment of serious news on its front pages; media awards which seemed more concerned with trivia than serious reporting; the rise of apathetic readers; the losses being suffered by former broadsheet newspapers – Guardian (-£6.2m), Independent (-£15m?), Times (-£20m?) – compared to the profits of the tabloid Mail (+£120m). He then looked at the techniques used by the Mail – punchy front pages, opinionated copy, views before news, picture-led layout, headlines with attitude – and how these had infiltrated the Independent and Times. His slides showed the similarities between the Independent and Mail front pages on big news stories, such as the publication of the Hutton and Butler reports on different aspects of the Iraq war. He pointed to the period when the Times was producing both broadsheet and tabloid versions: “....it was easy enough to demonstrate that the two papers were markedly different. Different in tone, priority, prominence, news values, story length and so on. But through it all the paper refused to budge from its public assertion that the two products were exactly the same!” Rusbridger went on to suggest the starting point of any discussion ought to be a frank acknowledgement that things have changed. The old broadsheets were no longer what they were. But, by and large, the media commentariat had gone along with the Times’ claim of no change. They did not want a debate.

I’m obviously biased, but I believe the Guardian’s “Berliner” format, midway between tabloid and broadsheet, has helped the paper escape the worst traits though it is by no means innocent. The Telegraph, with an infusion of former senior Mail journalists, has not just got rid of some of its best reporters but also introduced the opinionated copy and headlines with attitude of their former employer.
The Financial Times has steadfastly kept up its serious standards, though even the FT, as my Guardian colleague Polly Toynbee spotted, was woeful in its reporting of the Government’s proposed new £30,000 tax levy on non-doms (non-domicile foreigners living in the UK). In her words – and she is a well known fan of the paper – in the eighth week after the announcement she protested at the “page after page, day after day, of spurious, unsourced, unchecked campaign coverage, reporting ‘many planning to relocate all or part of their operations to countries with lower tax rates’”. The FT editor, Lionel Barber, cried “foul” declaring the paper’s editorial line favoured reform of the tax treatment of non-doms but not the Treasury’s “rushed and botched” plan. But it was not the editorial line she was criticising, but the reporting which was neither fair nor “without favour”. It was biased in its balance, full of favourable quotes from rich non doms, and hopeless in persuading these so-called exit candidates to identify themselves in public.

**SIN THREE: MORE INTERESTED IN POLITICS THAN IN POLICY**

An old sin but still operating even after specialist reporters rapidly expanded between the early 1970s and mid 1990s. It was an era when education, health and crime climbed up the political agenda in alignment with opinion polls putting them at the top of the public’s priorities. Even so policy is complicated. News desk editors don’t like too much complication. Some Times specialists were told to concentrate more human interest in their areas rather than policy. Criminal justice bills, welfare reform, pension restructuring require pages to cover in detail. We saw above how stricter eligibility rules for disability benefits received many times as much coverage as the government’s pledge to abolish child poverty. Why? The disability plan had become political with labour rebels able to stage the biggest – though still unsuccessful – backbench revolt in the first two years of Blair’s government. Political reporting through bi-focal lens can produce a more simplified story: who’s for and who’s against.

Then there is the old Whitehall trick of leaking policy proposals to political reporters, some of whom are not as up to date as the specialists so are more likely to run it not knowing it has already been announced – indeed, on some occasions policies that have not only been announced but announced several times before. Dressed up as a scoop, it is all too tempting for the less well informed to accept being spoon fed.

In the last decade as editorial budgets have been squeezed with the downturn in advertising and reduction in sales, there has been an accelerating trend of cutting specialist reporters. Most tabloids no longer have specialist education reporters. Broadsheets that used to have two, now only have one. There is no longer a full-time social security specialist, even though the benefit system has got even more complicated. The old style housing specialist, as we have seen above, who covered social and private housing has disappeared.

**SIN FOUR: GROUP THINK – HUNTING IN PACKS**

Again not a new vice, but one which strengthened as the specialist groups emerged. Where once there were three main beats – politics, police, and labour (industrial relations) – now there are multiple numbers, even as industrial reporters on most papers have been replaced.
Health is now divided between medical and administrative. Science was a burgeoning field with specialist sections as well as specialist reporters until the budget cuts began.

Nearly four decades ago Timothy Crouse persuaded Rollin Stone magazine that there was an interesting story to tell about how the press corps was operating during the 1972 Presidential election of Richard Nixon. Later his columns were expanded into a famous book, The Boys on the Bus. The press became a story and has remained one.

Here in the UK a familiar scene takes place once a social policy departmental briefing has concluded. As the minister leaves, the journalists get together. Sometimes in one group, some times – at the Home Office – in at least two: tabloid and old broadsheet. They swop and check quotes with each other and then discuss “what’s the story?”. Its driven by two factors: the intense competition between papers along with the insecurity of journalists. They don’t want an 11 pm call from their night news desks asking why they are leading with story A, when all the other papers have opted for story B. Within the groups there are often pairings – particularly when the specialists have held their posts for some time. They might even tip each other off when they have a scoop with the agreement nothing is done until the first editions break. There are, of course, some singular journalists who do not join in. And there are some briefings so straightforward, no group gathering is necessary.

Some of this is inevitable and can be productive. A big white paper or new bill will have multiple different angles that could be covered. Senior press officers on these big occasions will often stay behind to fill out answers already given, or take questions that were not called.

Where it has become perverse is when ministers run into trouble. That’s when Tony Blair’s “feral beast” begins to hunt.\(^{41}\) It has got worse as papers have become more hostile to politicians. Hugo Young, the Guardian’s chief political columnist who died in 2003, noted “a lot of political journalism (is) chasing itself in a downward spiral of propaganda, innuendo and competitive truth-stretching, in a context that assumes the worst motive for every political act or speech.” The lust for blood has been fed by the succession of ministers brought down during the Major and Blair governments. Tony Blair in his farewell speech on the media made a fair point in how the tone of criticism has changed: “Attacking motive is far more potent than attacking judgment. It is not enough for someone to have made an error. It has to be venal.” Not all papers go this far, but too many are falling in line with the motto of Lord Rothermere, the Daily Mail’s founder: “Give the readers a daily hate.”

**SIN FIVE: TOO ADVERSARIAL**

One of the drivers of this sin was the perception that Parliament had become too enfeebled in the face of Labour’s massive majorities in the 1997 and 2001 elections. There is some truth in that but the press has always been partisan. What is different is that it has got more anti-government and anti any authority. The Major government was attacked by the right-wing papers – partly because it was being insufficiently anti Europe – almost as ferociously as the current Labour government. The comment from Trevor Phillips, quoted earlier from the Guardian’s survey of leaders in public life, has resonance: “Journalists do now seem to believe that the person in charge is always wrong.”
Take the tabloid’s – particularly the Mail’s – persistent attacks on the National Institute for health and Clinical Excellence (NICE). This is one of Labour’s most important reforms. It was set up as a key cog in the drive for evidence-based medicine. Its remit was to bring together evidence of good practice, then promote and diffuse it. It was responsible for laying down standards and determining the criteria for the use of new drugs on the basis of both clinical and cost effectiveness. Previously, when left to clinicians there were huge and wasteful variations in practice. NICE was also a much stronger buffer against the hard sell of the drugs industry, requiring them to show what was new and more effective with new drugs. By 2005, NICE had made over 100 rulings so there had been plenty of “rationing” decisions for the tabloids to get cross about before the Herceptin drug story broke that year.

In May 2005, a new trial in the US had shown Herceptin reduced the risk of women in early stages of breast cancer of having a recurrence. It was licensed here for late stage breast cancer but was neither licensed nor vetted by NICE for early stage cancer. Roche, the manufacturer, had not even applied for a licence at that time but its PR firm went into overdrive. Unfortunately for them it rang Professor Lisa Jardine, who had written about her breast cancer asking her whether she would front a campaign to get her local health service to fund it. She did go public but only about the nefarious ways the pharmaceutical industry promotes drugs. None of this deterred the tabloids. They had found other patients, who were ready to speak of the death sentences they faced from the refusal of the NHS to fund it. It was quickly labelled by the media as “the new wonder drug”.

Back at NICE, the researchers found the benefits of the drug were not quite what the PR agency was suggesting. The 54% reduction in cancer was not quite what the media or public thought that to be: it meant that 9.4% of women on the drug would find cancer returned compared to 17.2% who did not have the drug. They also estimated that 18 patients would have to be treated to save one life. And for every 100 suitable patients prescribed the drug, 94 would have been exposed to the side effects without any benefit at a cost of £400,000 per patient saved. But none of this buttered the tabloids’ parsnips. They left that to The Guardian.

In a judicial review in the courts, a woman with three children who had been refused the drug, lost in the High Court but went on to win before the Appeal Court. But by then Patricia Hewitt, the Health Secretary, had already buckled to the tabloid blitz. In October 2005, she ordered that primary care trusts should not refuse to fund the drug solely on cost grounds.

What we were left with from the media fuss was a health secretary who had undermined one of Labour’s most important innovations; and a standards agency that was forced to review its research and find some grounds to support the decision.

An even worse example of media contempt for all in authority was the Mail’s campaign against the MMR (measles, mumps, rubella) vaccine for young children. It all began when one maverick scientist, in a trial involving only 12 children, suggested during a press conference that MMR jabs might cause autism and bowel disorder. Government medical advisers, scientists and public health doctors all denied the suggestion. The Medical research Council convened a committee of 37 leading experts, which concluded “there is no evidence to indicate any link”. An Institute for Child Health study reached the same conclusion. A 14-
year long study in Finland involving 3 million children who had had the MMR vaccine found no link. But the maverick, Andrew Wakefield, supported by the Mail pressed on. Nor did the Mail stop reporting on any family with autism who they found had used the MMR vaccine – not even after a 2005 study in Japan found autism had increased there in 1993 when MMR was withdrawn.

Vaccination rates plummeted – from 92% in 1995/96 to 80% in 2004/05. Herd immunity requires 95%. By 2008 there were about three million people aged 18 months to 18 years who had missed being properly vaccinated. The warnings from public health doctors proved true. Measles – the most dangerous of the three diseases – rose to 1,726 in 2007/08, more than all the cases in the previous 10 years put together.

The King’s Fund, a think tank in London which carried out a study of the media coverage of health in 2003, finally got an illogical explanation from a contact on the Mail for its destructive campaign: “It is not our job to promote group immunity. If some of our readers’ kids might be affected as individuals – even if that is a remote chance – then we have to report it, and will continue to do so.” The risks to the readers’ children are now much more serious given the fall in MMR jabs. The Mail contact conceded they ran scare stories “but if they have a certain basis in science, they make news....of course in empirical (sic) terms we do go over the top from time to time – and there might be all sorts of reasons for that – but if people didn’t like the paper’s coverage they wouldn’t buy it.” So much for clause one of the Press Complaints Commission that newspapers should never knowingly tell untruths.

The BBC did not emerge from this report with much glory either. Challenged by the authors on why they had followed up the anti MMR stories in the Mail, Mark Popescu, Editor of the Ten O’Clock News, said he was obliged to consider stories that widely read newspapers had initiated. MMR would continue across the media as long as the Daily Mail kept running with the story. He added: “Strictly on the level of risk, we probably over-reported MMR, but I am not just governed by that cold calculation. I am also governed by whether there is a public debate going on....”

What makes it worse is that television can have a much greater influence on people’s attitudes than press reports. Watching a film of a mother with her autistic child, explaining the autism had only emerged shortly after the MMR jab, has much more impact than a scientist explaining to camera there is no such link.

SIN SIX: TOO READILY DUPED

A classic example is set out in Nick Davies’s Flat Earth News: the millennium bug. It was first tentatively raised in the back pages of a Toronto paper, the Financial Post, in May 1993. By 1999 the world’s media was in over drive: all mortgage, insurance and pension records could be wiped out; computer guided elevators, security systems, fire alarms could cease to function; many ageing computers in eastern Europe would crash; US military defences, including its nuclear arsenal, could be disabled; power stations faced meltdown; planes could drop out of the sky.
Diverse interested parties were ready to push the story: office managers wanting new IT systems; companies making millennium bug kits selling at £30 a time; publishers of books on “How to Survive the Bug” and assorted titles. What had been created was an echo chamber in which media cries led to louder cries. So what happened on January 1, 2000? Well a computer system in the weather station in north Scotland did crash – but that was from mice nibbling a connection. In fact all the dire predictions proved wrong. So what was the media’s response? Simple, just quietly drop it. The UK government claimed to have helped 58 other countries and was reported to have spent over £400 million. The US bill came to something similar. Neither Italy nor Russia made serious efforts to confront the bug. They had no more trouble than the UK or US. Was this reported? No.

On the social policy front Tony Blair knew precisely how to divert the media’s attention. We usually fell hook, line and sinker. Take the launch of a five year crime control plan on July 19, 2004 drawn up by the Home Office.46 There were several welcome initiatives in the package – a big expansion of alternative programmes to prison, a new system of community policing, more drug treatment schemes. But these were not in tune with the Prime Minister’s tough rhetoric. In a short but completely misleading statement Blair asserted the plan “marks the end of the 1960s liberal, social consensus on law and order”. The mainstream media took the bait and devoted long columns to the end of the liberal consensus – which as I set out earlier had ended 12 years before – and completely ignored the new progressive proposals. The statement allowed Blair to introduce soft progressive policies under a tough headline, while at the same time continuing to distance Labour from its roots.

No one has done more to monitor, record and expose the many ways in which the media is misled, duped, or deliberately misreads science and health studies than Ben Goldacre in his weekly Bad Science column in the Guardian on Saturdays. A qualified doctor, scientist and holder of a masters degree in philosophy, Goldacre has been writing his column since 2003. Both erudite and witty, his targets are not confined to journalists but also include pharmaceutical PR agents, pseudo research units, quacks, cosmetic companies, homeopaths, and nutritionists. He has divided his collection of media howlers into three broad categories: whacky stories, scare stories, and breakthrough stories. There are now about 500 of them, some of the best republished in his book, Bad Science, released in autumn 2008 to rave reviews.47 He has his own blog, where readers forward their own findings.

He has taken on and punctured stories in virtually all national newspapers plus the BBC, exposed the way medical research can be skewed to mislead, and debunked a wide range of seasonal chestnuts. With surgical skill he has documented in detail the degree to which many journalists – like Melanie Phillips in the Mail’s campaign against MMR – totally misunderstands both the scientific method and basic epidemiology. Science does not do certainty which some commentators found difficult to comprehend. He writes with verve and memorable phrases: health scares are like toothpaste: they’re easy to squeeze out, but very difficult to get back in the tube. He has won a string of awards for his writing – he still works as an NHS doctor too – from the Association of British Science Writers, the Medical Journalism awards, and the Royal Statistical Society. He was described in the Telegraph as
“one of the few out and out good eggs” in journalism and even the Mail on line showed grudging respect.

SIN SEVEN: THE CONCENTRATION ON THE NEGATIVE

This seventh sin is the most serious one. Critics who make it, get their arguments distorted by the army in the trade ready to deny it. How do you maintain a liberal democracy if the public is systematically being misinformed? Geoff Mulgan, former head of the government’s policy unit, confessed in 2005: “The government’s worst nightmare is not that its policies will fail, rather that they might succeed but no one would believe them because of the chronic distrust of statistics on hospitals, schools, police.”

Of course what is going wrong needs exposing. Take the NHS in the last two years: the Observer’s campaign against poor maternity services was taken up by the Healthcare Commission; the Express’ concern for patient dignity was included in the Darzi plan, which will be used to assess hospitals; the Times’ punctured GP claims that patients didn’t want longer opening hours by commissioning an opinion poll; the Independent maintained a long campaign for improvements to mental health services; and the Guardian exposed various drug company scams.

But where are the good news stories about the NHS of which there are many. As David Bell, the former Ofsted chief noted above, a lack of coverage of positive stories can create the impression of a system in a perpetual state of crisis that is simply untrue. With 25,000 schools it is not hard to find some poor ones. The inspectors identify them, along with the much larger group of excellent schools that get ignored. The Healthcare Commission, which inspects NHS work, would echo a similar sentiment. With a million people seen by NHS staff every 24 hours, it is not hard to find people who have been inappropriately treated. But there have been huge improvements in NHS services as testified by the independent surveys of patient satisfaction ratings. At the various briefings from the different inspectorates that now examine public services – they numbered 12 until recent mergers – it has been intriguing to watch the assembled journalists searching desperately for the bad news in the fat annual returns. The poor old home affairs correspondents have had a bad decade – though you would not know it from the stories they write – as the categories recording dramatic decreases continue to widen. Even their old standby, violent crime, is now decreasing.

When I was grumbling to Howard Glennerster, the social policy guru at the London School of Economics, about this trend in negativity I was surprised by his response. It was, he said, the same in academia. The best way young researchers could get their research published was to concentrate on what was going wrong. So it is not just my trade that needs to take a look in the mirror. A new research study from the LSE released in September 2008, based on a survey of 1,100 Royal Society of Arts fellows, found them more cynical about politics than anything else: 51% viewed politics cynically, 37% media and 30% business. More seriously it found cynicism was the most important factor in prompting people to opt out of voting.
The US Senator Daniel Moynihan once said: “If you go into a country and all you see in the papers is good news, then you know all the good people are in jail.” But to go into a country and find all you can see is bad news is equally disturbing. David Bell paid tribute to the specialist education reporters but pointed to the increase in commentators, “fact-free and prejudice-rich; witness the casual slandering of state education that permeates our newspapers.”

One paradox is the time which all the serious papers now spend on ensuring there is something lighter or funny to lift the readers’ spirits from the grim events on modern news lists. But the uplifting events rarely include positive stories about public services. It is much more likely to be related to some sort of celebrity piece or forthcoming television programme.

One of the reasons I pushed in 1979 for the setting up of the Guardian’s weekly Society section on a Wednesday was to provide a place where public service managers and policymakers could turn to see what was new and succeeding in their fields and what might be copied in their localities. Contrary to the initial nervous responses of both editorial and advertising executives, once launched it not only raised the paper’s Wednesday circulation to the highest point of the working week, but with up to 130 tabloid pages of advertisements for public service and charity jobs was bringing in almost a third of the newspaper’s turnover at its peak.

There are intermittent moves within the media to shift the current negative/positive balance. There was a plea from the Queen for more good news in the media in her 1985 Christmas message. There was a call from Martyn Lewis, the TV presenter, in 1993 for a better balance between negative and positive news items on television. Contrary to his detractors he was not calling for a happy clappy good news service, nor a Soviet style nothing is wrong. What he did do was compare the balance which BBC reporters apply to individual stories, with the huge imbalance of negative-to-positive stories decided by the editors of the news programmes. He had a list of interesting positive stories that had been dropped. What he wanted was a small shift in the balance from 5% positive to perhaps 10% to 15%. He got some support from a trustee and a manager, but his campaign failed and he was dropped as one of the principal readers of the BBC’s main evening news which in those days was nine o’clock.

Early in 2008, Channel 5 news announced a restructuring that would reject the “doom and gloom” of rival bulletins and search for the positive – something which Martyn Lewis had specifically ruled out. But the relaunch was disrupted by the pregnancy of the channel’s new name, Natasha Kaplinsky, the Strictly Come Dancing star, who took maternity leave from the UK’s highest paying news reader post very shortly after she began the £1 million job.

There have been intermittent initiatives by the press too. The Edinburgh Evening News tried out for one day an Edinburgh Evening Good News in 2007. Fortunately for them it was a day without any big bad news stories. Executives on London’s Evening Standard issued a memo
in 2006 calling for calmer, cleverer and cheerier stories declaring readers did not want to be “coshed by doom and disaster stories on the way home”. But doom and gloom still dominates the paper, even when violent crime goes down and the NHS improves. The morning and evening freebies in many big cities now are more cheerful – they depend on advertising and advertisers do not like bad news. But they demonstrate that being cheerful is not enough. They are thin, jejune, unintelligent giveaways with little journalistic merit. With the launch of the redesigned Guardian on September 12, 2005, the editor insisted the third editorial of each day should be about something positive, which could be praised rather than condemned. It was not popular with some of my colleagues. And at the beginning, it was intriguing to discover how difficult it was to find a positive story to fill the “In praise of...” slot.

One last reason why editors should address negativity is the degree to which it tilts papers into seeing events as either black or white. Life is more complicated than that. It is time news was treated in a more adult manner.

As an antidote to the rather black picture so far with these sins, let me make the colour a little greyer by quoting a Norwegian sociologist at Oxford, Stein Ringen, at Green College. Ringen found British newspapers were often sloppy, inaccurate, and short on dignity, failings not helped by their hopeless self-regulator, the Press Complaints Commission, but these should not blind people to the collective role Britain’s vibrant press played. With respect to this last criterion, he thought it “simply brilliant”. It may lack the monopolistic monotone of the New York Times and Le Monde but its competitive plurality rendered it “independent, irreverent, entertaining, often funny, and, thank God, intrusive.” The diversity of its whole was more crucial than the shortcomings of its parts.

The trouble with this view is that unlike people with access to college common rooms or club libraries, the vast majority of British newspaper readers do not have access to the five “serious” serious papers and their five “popular” cousins. They are usually only using one.

**TWO LAST PARADOXES:**

**PARADOX ONE: NEVER HAVE REPORTERS HAD MORE ACCESS TO INFORMATION**

Nick Davies denies that his recent book *Flat Earth News* – with its coruscating criticisms of modern journalism – suggests there was a golden age, but he gives a clear signal that he thinks the 1960s were better than today. I disagree. There has never been a better time for reporting to flourish. They have never had access to more sources of information. I was shocked on returning from two years in the US to join the Guardian in 1969 at just how little public information was available in the UK. There were few inspectors of services, and none producing detailed reports; almost no public audit; no Freedom of Information Act; no specialist select committees in parliament; a minimum of consultation documents from governments before hard policy papers emerged.
The idea that newspapers can hold governments to account is just a professional myth. In our scatter gun way, we can pursue wrongs on many fronts and do so. These are important, but just think how far short of what is necessary they fall. Take education. The country has 25,000 schools. Most newspapers have only one education reporter. The Guardian has had up to six if you include the Guardian education supplement staff. But how could even six reporters cover such a beat. They could not. Ofsted has more than 2,000 inspectors, who not only provide detailed reports on each individual school (after a team of people have spent days there), but thematic reports too. The same applies to the health service, housing, social services, police, prison, probation and prosecution. They all write reports on the individual organisations within these fields and thematic reports addressing current problems and future challenges across the individual service.

Add to this the Audit Commission, with another 2000 staff, and which was not even in existence in the 1960s and a much beefed up National Audit Office, which was. All their reports are on their websites and are sent to specialist journalists. Add in the select committees with their specialist advisers scrutinising the fields that Whitehall departments cover; the separate competency reviews of individual departments; and a Freedom of Information Act, which is too constrained but does get much more information disclosed. Then there is the much more consultative approach to policy making – green papers before white papers; consultative bills before real bills. It should be the best of times for reporters but, alas, with the advent of the internet, reporting is on the retreat and commentary continues to expand. This is an understandable response to a 24/7 society in which most people obtain the news first from their radio, TV or internet. But the heart of a great paper should still remain the expertise, energy and investigative skills of their reporting room. When I joined the Guardian 40 years ago there was only one full time commentator, Peter Jenkins, on the paper. When I retired in 2006 there were 28 and the number has increased since.

PARADOX TWO: FROM BIG BAD BEAST TO FATALLY WOUNDED STAG

There has been a dramatic change in the perception of mainstream media. Only four years ago when I first began thinking of this study, the mainstream media was seen as a big, bad, uncontrolled beast. But as I near the end, it is widely regarded as a fatally wounded stag. In the last decade the media has been leaching at an accelerating rate readers, viewers, advertisers – all three decamping to the internet. A fourth wound for the media companies listed on the stock exchange, is a catastrophic drop in their share values. From a peak of 17 million daily copies in the 1950s, the national dailies are down to 10 million. Where once they were losing one million a decade, it is now more than five times as fast. Huge numbers of journalists have been made redundant. Regional newspapers, which play a crucial role in training, have been hit even harder. Regional evening papers are trying all manner of variations: from half free/half paid for (Manchester Evening News) to the Bath Chronicle move from five nights a week to one. Weekly papers are shrinking, merging or being shut. Television is in an equally bad state. ITV has lost half its audience. BBC television news ditto, though its brilliant website continues to attract growing audiences. The same applies to newspaper websites. The Guardian’s, which is the oldest and still the biggest press website, now has 25 million regular users – many million overseas. But how do we turn this 25
million, who have got used to receiving free news, into a profitable venture. That is the biggest challenge facing the trade.

LESSONS LEARNED

What can one conclude from all this? Here are five lessons:

• Where there is a policy vacuum, as there was with asylum, the media’s influence can become disproportionate.

• Conversely, where there is an unequivocal pledge with clear targets, which is what emerged from Tony Blair’s promise to end child poverty within 20 years, then the media can apply pressure on ministers to meet their commitment as each milestone comes up. It is interesting to compare the poverty pledge with the housing promise. The first was very specific and even better was in a category where the numbers are collected and published each year. This allowed the media fed by the anti-poverty campaigners to chart the progress – or more accurately the shortfalls – year by year. But the housing pledge – to repeat “within 10 to 20 years no one should be seriously disadvantaged by where they live” – was too vague, lacked clear criteria by which it could be judged, and was not subject to annual measurement and monitoring. Hence it received almost no media coverage or pressure.

• Where things are going wrong in a public service – such as the run of genuine bad news stories in the health service in the second half of 1999 – the media can accelerate decisions. This can sometimes be to the detriment of good policy making. There are grounds for suggesting the NHS received too much money in the rush to reach its new spending target of the European average. A government which came in declaring its first priority was “education, education, education” ended up giving the NHS much more than the education service.

• Ministers should be more ready to take on the tabloids – and also recognise, as the drug case illustrates, that they are not quite as predictable on their main issues of concern as sometimes believed. Even more important for a government purporting to pursue evidence-based policy making is to do just that. The proposed reclassifications of drugs according to their harmfulness by the independent committee of experts set up by the Police Foundation, have been upheld by a succession of reports from the Government’s advisory body, yet are still being rejected by ministers.

• For all the bravado of the trade, the media is still too ready to follow the government’s agenda – as set out in the housing case study – rather than challenge it.
To end on an upbeat theme. Slowly the concern for the standards of British media is breeding new institutions that might help slow the decline and even raise some media organisation’s standards. Oxford’s Reuters Institute is now part of the University’s Politics Department. After a rocky transfer, it has stabilised and has good people to take it forward. Then there is the Media Standards Trust, under Martin Moore, which has recently won a large grant that should allow it to consolidate and expand. An earlier group, the Mediawise Trust, originally set up in 1993 by “victims of media abuse” has widened its remit to improve the standards of reporting of sensitive issues such as asylum seekers, mental health, poverty. It has worked with the British Society of Editors to conduct seminars on these issues leading to well written guides for journalists.

Yet another welcome initiative is the Science Media Centre, set up six years ago and run by the articulate Fiona Fox. Its purpose is to act as a bridge between scientists and journalists. At its launch, although many scientists were getting better at talking about their research to specialist journals and correspondents, many continued to see science in the headlines as a threat rather than an opportunity. Its aim is to get the media to “do” science better by getting scientists to “do” the media better. It seeks to anticipate big science stories through its contacts and provide good background material for journalists and a list of scientists ready to talk. It has a data bank of scientists covering multiple areas who are ready to talk to the media that has become a key contact point for reporters and current affairs programmes.

Another welcome site, Hitting the Headlines, to which newspaper readers wanting to check out the accuracy of science stories in the press, is no longer online alas. It examined 577 articles in the press, checking them against the original research study rather than corporate press releases, for accuracy and credibility. The idea has now been incorporated within the NHS choices website, where it runs as Behind the Headlines, under the direction of Sir Muir Gray, chief knowledge officer of the NHS. Ben Goldacre was one of its early advocates. Each day the site’s team selects health stories that are making headlines and sends them to a leading provider of evidence-based healthcare information for an independent analysis of their accuracy.

We need more of such initiatives. It would help to have some of the many fact check sites that monitor newspapers and broadcasters in the US, not just for accuracy but for sources. At one point there were at least nine different sites in the US doing this: some concentrating on accuracy, others on sources. But even over there, they were running into funding difficulties. Anyone who knows any rich philanthropists should guide them to the Media Standards Trust.

The Guardian’s introduction of a readers’ editor – or ombudsman – in November 1997, was another hopeful step. The aim was to discuss publicly and impartially in the paper’s pages complaints and queries about its journalism. It was the first such post in a British newspaper, but had been in operation in some American newspapers for decades. The founding principle was simple and sound: newspapers which constantly call others to account, should be more readily accountable and open themselves. There was an added benefit: in an age of
plummeting trust in the mainstream media, systematic and open corrections of mistakes in a paper should increase trust. Private Eye, the satirical magazine, found the clarification and corrections columns run by the first holder of the post so entertaining that it re-ran several of them in its own columns. Three other British newspapers quickly followed the Guardian’s example – the Observer, Independent on Sunday, Daily Mirror –but there has not been much movement since. Another example, alas, of how my trade remains in denial of its imperfections.

On top of this, of course, we need a much more effective press complaints commission, which should be much less dominated by tabloid editors and much more robust in applying its own code of conduct. And then there are the three proposals in Labour’s 1992 manifesto, that triggered Rupert Murdoch’s assaults on the political party: stricter controls of foreign ownership (which would have hurt Conrad Black’s Telegraph group as well as Murdoch’s News International); tighter regulation of predatory pricing (which Murdoch had used to boost the Times’ circulation and almost kill the Independent); and a right of privacy law. All were dropped by the next election following the wooing of the publishers.

A stronger right to privacy to curb the insidious intrusions of tabloid hacks has been achieved, but by the courts, not through parliament. Predictably, the key judge in the cases, has been lambasted by the tabloid papers. They just reinforce the truth of both A.J. Liebling, the American journalist: “The freedom of the press is guaranteed only to those who own one” and Grace Kelly, the American actress: “The freedom of the press works in such a way that there is not much freedom from it.”

Thank you for listening or reading this tome. All comments would be welcome. My best email address is at the College: malcolm.dean@nuffield.ox.ac.uk
Notes

1. BBC website.
5. Guardian Media Supplement, 17.01.05.
6. Guardian Media Supplement: two successive weeks, 10.01.05; 17.01.05.
8. Personal interview.
14. Roy Greenslade, Guardian Media: 13.05.05.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid.
18. JRF Inquiry into Income and Wealth, Tackling UK Poverty and Disadvantage in the 21st Century, 1995; the IFS publish annual reports on how far the child poverty targets are progressing.
21. Private interview.
22. The full speech is in the *End Poverty* book.
25. All on Sunday, March 27, 2000.
29. New Statesman; 12.01.00.
32. Chapter in fourth edition of *Oxford Handbook of Criminology*.
34. Private interview.
38. Alan Rusbridger’s Hugo Young lecture to Sheffield University, 2005, on “What Are Newspapers For?”
39. “To throw the enemy the chancellor’s head would be utterly in vain”, Polly Toynbee, Guardian 15.02.08.
40. Private conversations.
41. The full Blair speech on the media on June 12, 2007, plus the Q&A at the Reuters Building that followed, plus other commentators views were published in *Political Quarterly*, issue 4, 2007.


Ibid.


Guardian leader, 20.07.04; Polly Toynbee column, Guardian 21.07.04.

*Bad Science*, HarperCollins, 2008; the blog is at badscience.net.

“Cynicism can damage democracy’s health”, by Caroline Davies, Observer, 14.09.08.

Martyn Lewis “Not my idea of good news”; Independent, 26.04.93.

Times on Line 07.02.08.

Peter Wilby commentary, Guardian Media supplement, 12.11.07.
About the Author

Malcolm Dean has been a journalist for 46 years -- 38 of them on the Guardian climbing through the ranks as a roving reporter, social affairs leader writer, social policy editor and from the mid 1980s as an assistant editor. He served for eight years as the editorial representative on the Scott Trust, which owns both the Guardian and the Observer.

Trained by Kemsley Newspapers between 1956-59, he then spent four years writing his way round the world touching every continent except Antarctica. On his return to the UK where he worked briefly for Reuters, he won a TUC Education Trust fellowship to study politics and economics at Ruskin College, Oxford; a Harkness Fellowship to Chicago University to study politics and international relations; and an American Political Science Association Congressional Fellowship working as a speech-writer and aide in both the House and Senate1967-68.

He joined The Guardian in 1969, was seconded by the paper in 1978 to serve as special adviser to the Secretary of State for Health and Social Services in the last year of the 1976-79 Labour Government. Returning to the paper in 1979, he launched the Guardian's highly successful Society section, a weekly supplement specialising on social policy, which he edited for most of its first 20 years while still writing daily editorials for the paper. For 15 of those years he was also writing a regular column on the politics of health for the Lancet medical journal. While on the Guardian he was awarded the 1996 Commonwealth Press Union Fellowship to look at health services in East Africa and the 2003 Economic and Social Science Research Council's media fellowship to write a layman's guide to the Council's Growing Older programme.

He has served on a wide variety of national working parties, advisory boards and charitable trusts. His recent appointments include chairing a Joseph Rowntree Foundation commission on older people; sitting on the Chief Medical Officer's advisory group on the regulation of doctors; and he is still serving on the Fawcett Society's Commission on Women in the Criminal Justice System and as a trustee of the Young Foundation. He retired from The Guardian in June 2006, taking up his fellowship at Nuffield in the Autumn of that year. In December, 2008, Nuffield's Governing Body approved his election as an Associate Member of the College for three years from January 1, 2009.