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No 10 is trying to control the media, and everyone in our democracy should be afraid

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Sunday February 09 2020, 12.01am, The Sunday Times
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In Westminster and Washington, relations between the government and journalists are at their lowest ebb. Routine lines of communication have been severed as political leaders use the electronic media to get their message out directly, bypassing the traditional mediators in print and on the airwaves. In Whitehall the stand-off flared into an unprecedentedly ugly incident in the foyer behind the shiny black door of No 10 Downing Street last week. First a security guard divided accredited correspondents into separate groups on either side of a carpet. Next Boris Johnson's communications director, Lee Cain, himself a former reporter on The

Sun and The Mail on Sunday, gave the order: “Those invited to the briefing can stay — everyone else, I’m afraid, will have to leave.”

After some argument the journalists all walked out in solidarity, among them Laura Kuenssberg, Robert Peston and Beth Rigby, from the BBC, ITV and Sky, and representatives from all the national newspaper groups. David Frost, the government official spearheading negotiations with the European Union, did not get to deliver his briefing.

Why should Johnson or indeed Donald Trump care? They spurn the mainstream media (MSM), yet both men are enjoying soaring popularity. The real challenge is for the MSM to persuade the public that they should care, in their own interest. The self-regard of those, like me, doing this job doesn’t matter. What is important is that readers, listeners, and viewers are increasingly missing out on the information they need to function as independent citizens in a democratic society. Instead they are being manipulated by elected governments anxious to avoid being held to account by any outside force, be it parliament, the judiciary or the media.

Downgrading the MSM has been a cumulative process in which some powerful organisations have connived for their own selfish advantage. The BBC, for example, has consistently undermined collective attempts by the broadcasters to stage proper leaders’ debates at election times, in favour of their shouty Question Time formats. Sneering at the Westminster lobby as Freemasonry is a cheap shot. Newspapers are partisan. Individual journalists have their friends and sources and should compete with each other. That is not the issue.

At stake is whether the government should deny the public the facts and background to the decisions it takes. Information which should be available on the record, and of a type which was briefed freely in the past, is now being handed out as a favour to selected journalists in the expectation of favourable coverage. Even neutral analysis is unacceptable, otherwise

No 10 would have included on its admission list wire services such as Reuters and specialist correspondents.

Although the Johnson administration likes to be seen as radical and transformative, its behaviour continues a depressing trend to politicise the provision of official information which began in the New Labour years.

The difference today is that the executive branch seems willing to do away with any of the traditional checks and balances to unfettered government including the free press. And thanks in large part to the arrival of digital media, the clout of the MSM has been so eroded that a malign government could effectively snuff it out.

The so-called lobby system is widely misunderstood. As in David Hare's play *Pravda*, it is routinely portrayed as a conspiracy between ministers and elite insider journalists to mislead the public. Not in my experience. Over more than 30 years as a lobby member, the reason I attended briefings has been to get more information out of government to pass on to our audiences.

The battles in Victorian times for a press gallery to report on parliament and for the lobby to report from behind the scenes were all about access. Eventually they were established with the permission of parliament as an institution, not by agreement with individual MPs, parties or governments. That is why governments have always been irked by their existence. The behaviour of Johnson's team follows John Major, Tony Blair and David Cameron's advisers in attempting peevisly to change the physical arrangements for briefings to make life more difficult for journalists and to try to take back more control for themselves.

This government no longer seems to feel an obligation to be straight with the public by respecting the conventions by which the MSM gained access to some information as of right.

At my first No 10 briefing, Margaret Thatcher's press secretary Bernard Ingham introduced himself and told me that because my organisation, the somewhat controversial breakfast franchise TV-am, had been accepted by the parliamentary

institutions, I would have the same access as the BBC and ITV. He was as good as his word.

Access then included regular interviews automatically with the prime minister and other ministers, and weekly briefing sessions with the leader of the House, John Biffen, and the deputy prime minister, Willie Whitelaw. The Labour leader Neil Kinnock also held a weekly round table until he tried to exclude some papers during the Wapping dispute. Then, as last week, the lobby collectively refused to accept these terms and cancelled the meetings.

None of this automatic access is still in place today. Substantive open briefings and regular extended news conferences no longer take place. Civil servants are afraid to provide context, deferring to politically motivated special advisers (spads). No wonder the chief spad, Dominic Cummings, publicly sacked and humiliated the Treasury media adviser Sonia Khan last autumn for speaking out of turn. He has now “joked” that half the spads will lose their jobs in the government reshuffle this week.

Last week Johnson proudly told MPs: “I am a journalist”, but his career in print was notable for its partisan brio rather than devotion to facts. As prime minister he has gone along with avoiding interviews and question-and-answer sessions. He has threatened the BBC and political journalists with radical change. As shown with his Brexit night video, he has expanded the government payroll to include technicians capable of getting his message out on social media without calling in independent MSM professionals.

Attacking and sidelining the MSM as “fake news” has worked for Trump. But his irrepressible public comments and tweeting give him far more exposure than any leading UK politician. He also enjoys the full-throttle support of the Fox News channel and much of talk radio. Cummings, of course, would like to remove the strictures mandating impartiality for news broadcasters here.

But how did the president celebrate his acquittal in his impeachment trial? By holding up newspaper front pages. Perhaps he was trolling his harshest critics or perhaps he unwittingly demonstrated the importance of independent mainstream media as something to trust and fight for.

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