

THE FREE PRESS?

A MONTHLY JOURNAL AND TEACHING TOOL EXPOSING PROPAGANDA IN THE MASS MEDIA

A news resource which is **not:**

Owned by **billionaires**
Beholden to **advertisers**
Staffed by **the elite**

Unlike other journals we **declare our interests:**

No **profit motive**
No **cronyism**
An interest in exposing **media bias** by applying the **propaganda model**

What is the propaganda model?

The vast majority of “headline news” providers in the UK are profit-driven corporations, affiliated to even larger corporations, who make most of their money from selling advertising space to other businesses.

The propaganda model predicts that such media will generate a view of the world that is overwhelmingly favourable to the interests of big business and marginalises, ignores or attacks opposing views.

A wealth of evidence supports the model. Head to www.the-free-press.co.uk for an overview.

Wondering why you’ve never heard of the propaganda model?

Perhaps you’ve been getting your news from...the news.



Test and Trace

The Corporate Media’s Inability to Trace the Truth

At Prime Minister’s Questions on the 9th September 2020 Keir Starmer grilled Boris Johnson about problems with the coronavirus testing system, which had become so dysfunctional members of the public were being offered their “nearest test” hundreds of miles away.

Johnson used the phrase “NHS Test and Trace” no less than ten times in his responses and accused Starmer of “attacks on NHS test and trace”.

The Establishment media were apparently convinced by the PM’s bombast:

NHS coronavirus test and trace 'shambolic, frustrating, unfit for purpose', 119 call handler tells **ITV News** was the headline of an ITV piece that day.

Is NHS test-and-trace reaching 80% of contacts? asked the BBC on 11th September.

‘Utter shambles’: GPs and medics decry NHS test-and-trace system lamented **The Guardian**.

Note that all three headlines refer to “NHS test and trace”. None of the articles, all of which explore concerns about the test and trace scheme in reasonable depth, mention the word “Serco”.

Why do we?

Well...Serco, in collaboration with other outsourcing companies like Sitel, receive the majority of funding for the test and trace system. “Serco was initially contracted for £108 million for fourteen weeks from the contract start date up to the 23rd August,” Open Democracy report, “with the option to extend for a longer period up to a value of £410 million in total” – and similar amounts slated for Sitel.

In contrast, Private Eye (issues 1525 and 1528) report that Public Health England and local authorities have “only received a £300 million payment from the Department of Health to support their contract tracing work.”

Despite this imbalance of funding (and the fact that Serco/Sitel only deal with “non-complex” cases) “just 12.3% of tracing has been performed by the Serco set-up”. This means, Private Eye summarise, that “public health officials...are working out to be 50 times more productive

on the government’s numbers.”

This should come as no surprise. Serco have a history of incompetence – indeed, outright fraudulence – when it comes to handling public contracts. In 2019 the company were fined £19.2m for fraud and false accounting over an electronic tagging service “outsourced” to them by the Ministry of Justice – this on top of £70 million compensation they paid at an earlier date.

Outsourcers also outsource and Politics Home have revealed that Concentrix, “the US company behind a major tax credits debacle, are among those who have been handed (test and trace) contracts by Serco”.

The tax credits debacle in question saw Concentrix, while completing outsourcing work for HMRC, mistakenly reduce or halt benefits payments to some of the most vulnerable in society.

Why would the Conservatives, faced with the worst public health crisis in decades, entrust such a vital service to firms with a poor track record and no health background?

The neoliberal commitment to privatisation and dismantling the public sector is an obvious answer. Indeed, Serco’s chief executive Rupert Soames highlighted to staff the key role the test and trace contract could play in “cementing the position of the private sector companies in the public sector supply chain”.

Rupert Soames, we should mention, is the grandson of Winston Churchill and the brother of Nicholas Soames - a Tory MP until last year. Current Tory health minister Edward Argar used to work as a lobbyist for Serco and, according to Open Democracy, the company “sponsored an event at last

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How does the propaganda model work in practice?

Critics of the propaganda model claim that it is a “conspiracy theory.”

This, perhaps purposefully, misses the point of the propaganda model.

A conspiracy will not happen of its own accord. People must gather in rooms and have meetings to instigate a conspiracy.

The beauty of modern media propaganda is that it simply **follows from the institutional structure of large media companies.**

Consider someone at the bottom of this structure: a young journalist at Rupert Murdoch’s Sun newspaper: **Will this journalist have to be told, in a conspiratorial manner, not to pursue stories about unrest in the News International boardroom and corporate malpractice by one of the paper’s leading advertisers?**

Not likely. Do **you** try to earn job security by going against the values of the institution that employs you?

Of course, like us, journalists are unlikely to reflect on the institutional parameters that confine them. Far easier to subconsciously adopt these values and *believe* that you believe them.

If 90-95% of mainstream journalism positions are filled by people who share the same framework of values, know which stories to pursue and which to ignore, what can be said and can’t be said, that makes for a robust propaganda system.

You will, of course, have a hard time convincing journalists that this is what they’re doing. Then again, as Upton Sinclair famously said:

year’s Conservative Party conference”.

At what point does commitment to privatisation (i.e. government ministers handing public money to private bodies) become outright cronyism?

Enter Dido Harding, appointed the chair of “NHS Test and Trace”.

Like Serco, Harding has a history of failure. While she was in charge at Talk Talk the company suffered a cyberattack that resulted in the theft of 150,000 customer details. The hack cost the “company £60 million and lost it 95,000 customers” and Harding was widely condemned for her handling of the crisis.

However, Harding’s connections are strong. She is married to Conservative MP John Penrose (who, purely coincidentally, we’re sure, has links to the 1828 think-tank who’ve argued for NHS privatisation...), was appointed to the House of Lords by David Cameron and is on the board at the illustrious Jockey Club. Even The Telegraph have described her rise as “chumocracy at work” – and the public are paying the cost.

The last week of September saw a resurgence of the virus, local lockdowns and economic damage...but Serco are in rude health. They recently declared a “53% rise in half-year trading profits” according to a Sky News story that reads like a press release – “The debate over NHS Test & Trace should not distract from the progress this company (Serco) is making”.

There it is again...NHS Test and Trace. What prevents journalists seeing – or reporting – the kind of scandal it should be their very *raison d’être* to expose?

After all, journalists love to crow about their pursuit of truth and willingness to stand up to power. ITV’s political editor Robert Peston has described impartial journalism as “weighing the evidence and saying on the balance of probabilities ... this is the truth.”

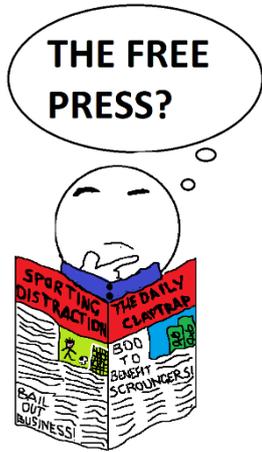
Ex-Guardian editor Alan Rusbridger wrote a passionate defence of journalism in which he noted the “need for an institution, an estate, a profession, a trade...that exists independently of the other main centres of power in society.”

Therein lies the rub. Does a Sky News journalist, working for a company shaped by Rupert Murdoch and answerable to advertisers, exist independently of other sources of power? Peston’s ITV and the Guardian are equally reliant on advertising revenue from big businesses, while the BBC are accountable to the government and face constant flak from right-wing think-tanks funded by wealth.

So much for independence – and so much for the truth. None of the four articles on “NHS Test and Trace” highlighted in this piece informed their readers that the government have contracted out their wellbeing to private companies owned by their friends/donors, often without tender, and irrespective of past failures.

In fact, by inane parrotting “NHS Test and Trace” these outlets have collaborated in blaming private failures on the public sector – a narrative billionaire press owners and big businesses are only too happy for the public to swallow. How else can they continue to enjoy their slice of the privatisation pie?

The mass media are not independent of power, they *are* power – and corporate journalists are the lapdogs kidding themselves they’re independent because they never strain their leash. How else to explain their sudden word blindness when “Serco” should be exploding in their vision?



“It’s difficult to get a man to understand something when his salary depends upon him not understanding it.”

HOMEWORK!

Have a look at the Sky News article on Serco discussed in our article - <https://news.sky.com/story/big-fat-zero-profit-boost-to-serco-from-covid-19-contracts-12043715>

Which vision of journalism do you think the article is closer to:

- 1) Robert Peston and Alan Rusbridger’s “this is the truth”, “a trade independent of power” vision
- 2) The vision of journalism highlighted in this newsletter: linked to and in service of corporate interests?

What features of the article – structure, word choice, content, etc – helped you decide?

Drop us an e-mail and let us know: thefreepress@yahoo.com

* Visit www.the-free-press.co.uk an online version of the main article (fully linked to sources) and more information on the media and propaganda