



The Matrix Database - Methodology

Selecting the “Top 100” UK Journalists

It is challenging to find an objective measure for the 100 most influential journalists in the UK. How does the influence of a weekly Daily Mail columnist compare to a leader writer at the Times? Or a BBC editor?

Social media has many flaws but does provide an approximation of how much someone is listened to or deemed “worthy” of following. To this end, we decided to use Twitter follower counts as a measure for weighting journalistic influence. Twitter is generally seen as the most “news friendly” social media platform. This is reflected in the fact that almost all leading journalists maintain Twitter accounts (even veterans like Andrew Neil and Andrew Marr) – or are told to maintain them by view-hungry editors!

The industry website journalism.co.uk lists full-time journalists and their Twitter follower count.

We selected for our database the highest ranked journalism.co.uk journalists by Twitter following who **primarily work for a UK news outlet** and **primarily report UK news or shape UK opinion**.

Sports and entertainment writers/presenters, BBC World Service journalists (who primarily exercise influence outside of the UK) and correspondents for US or web-only outlets were the most common entrants with high Twitter followings who we filtered out.

We added a total of six journalists to the database who were missing from the journalism.co.uk list: Andrew Marr, Fiona Bruce, Kirsty Wark, John Simpson, Nicholas Witchell and Faisal Islam.

The first four are prominent BBC journalists who may no longer be “full-time” but still present significant opinion-shaping programmes (Question Time, Newsnight). Faisal Islam is the current BBC economics editor and Nicholas Witchell is the long-time BBC royal correspondent.

According to the [Reuters Digital Report](#), the BBC is by far the most wide-reaching news service in the UK, with three times the reach of its closest TV and print rivals. We went beyond the journalism.co.uk list in this case to ensure that our database captured the most influential BBC journalists.



“Matrix” Criteria

Each journalist on the database has entries under the below headings.

Education

A [parliamentary report](#) on social mobility in Britain, compiled by The Sutton Trust, noted that “Like the politicians it holds up to public scrutiny, the media is also drawn from a narrow range of backgrounds... around half of the 100 top media professionals went to Oxbridge”

The report goes on to list the potential consequences of this: “(it) risks narrowing the conduct of public life to a small few, who are very familiar with each other but far less familiar with the day-to-day challenges facing ordinary people in the country. That is not a recipe for a healthy democratic society.”

Will we also find that the majority of top UK journalists are privately and/or Oxbridge educated and “very familiar” with the rest of Britain’s elite?

The Revolving Door

“As well as a shared mentality,” Owen Jones writes, “the Establishment is cemented by financial links and a 'revolving door' culture: that is, powerful individuals gliding between the political, corporate and media worlds - or who manage to inhabit these various worlds at the same time.”

The risks of this are obvious. How can, for example, Daniel Finkelstein report independently on the actions of ex-Chancellor George Osborne (himself a revolving door expert thanks to his business connections and Evening Standard editorship!) when he used to write speeches for him?

(In fact, Owen Jones notes, Finkelstein wrote speeches for Osborne *while on The Times payroll for commentating on Osborne’s government*)

How many of the Top 100 UK journalists have a background/current interest in the fields of politics and business they are meant to hold to account?

“Establishment” Connections

If a close family member such as a parent, sibling, grandmother/grandfather or aunt/uncle/cousin worked as a politician or as the CEO of a powerful company...would you be able to report on them impartially and hold them to account before the eyes of the nation?



Perhaps you won't need to. Individuals raised in a household where establishment values are the norm, where role models/social points of reference are family members who casually discuss the business of running the country, will almost certainly internalise these values or consider them "natural".

Even a distant relation can offer a helping hand up the establishment ladder. Boris Johnson [reputedly](#) landed his first job at the Times thanks to his godmother, the writer Rachel Billington. Despite being sacked from the job for fabricating a quote, Johnson swiftly found himself working at The Daily Telegraph thanks to *another* connection: Sir Max Hastings, who he met at Oxford University

Graduates of Eton or Oxbridge almost always enter professional life with countless personal connections to those in other fields thanks to the over-representation of Eton/Oxbridge grad at the highest level in Britain. Indeed, friendships forged at these institutions often go on to play a defining role in national power structures. Boris Johnson and Michael Gove offer a current example (both were also initially journalists, we note – see **Revolving Door**).

On the database we will distinguish between Primary and Secondary connections

Primary connections suggest an indisputable conflict of interest – e.g. a close family relationship or long-term friendship which, by definition, would render impartial reporting of the person in question impossible

Secondary connections will be looser, less "committed" connections – e.g. recent friendships or unusually close professional relationships - that, nonetheless, raise questions about the possibility of impartial reporting. A journalist known for being especially friendly with Boris Johnson when they both worked at The Telegraph would be an example of a secondary connection.

Under secondary connections we will also include **group membership or affiliations with the potential to compromise a journalist's impartiality** – e.g. connections to think-tanks with specific political agendas. It seems fair to say that journalists who choose to associate themselves with a certain group – and the connections with likeminded individuals group membership entails – are calling into question their ability to report impartially on related topics.

Salary/Indications of Wealth

As the Sutton Trust Report notes, it raises serious questions about democratic representation if the national agenda is driven by people "less familiar with the day-to-day challenges facing ordinary people in the country".

Can a journalist like Marina Hyde, daughter of Sir Alastair Edgcumbe James Dudley-Williams, 2nd Baronet, granddaughter of Conservative politician Sir Rolf Dudley-Williams, 1st Baronet, truly relate to the challenges faced by ordinary Britons?



Her attempts to do so will not be helped by the fact that she almost certainly earns a six-figure salary at the Guardian.

The salaries of BBC journalists are regularly published. It will be more challenging for us to document the income of journalists for private outlets, like Hyde, though other indications of wealth are often available.

Andrew Neil, for example, likes to boast of his French Chateaux and recently referred to a US property he might sell to cover losses from his GB News contract (the apartment is [rumoured](#) to have cost \$3.2 million and to be in Trump Tower). Neil appeared to confirm that his GB News contract was worth £4 million ([source](#)) over its four-year term.

This level of wealth indisputably puts Neil in an elite bracket.

If a large number of the Top 100 UK journalists join him there, it raises serious concerns about reporting of issues like jobs, tax credits and benefits that primarily effect those on a very different economic footing.

Complaints / Apologies

Journalists make mistakes. We all do.

Nonetheless, it is worth recording **upheld complaints against journalists** and their own **apologies for past mistakes** as these can provide insight into potential bias and conflicts of interest.

Countless high-profile journalists have, for example, lined up to apologise for not challenging US-UK narratives enough in the lead up to the Iraq War (Nick Robinson: “The build-up to the invasion of Iraq is the point in my career when I have most regretted not pushing harder and not asking more questions”). Were these truly “mistakes” or do they offer an insight into the willingness of journalists to bend to the narratives of power?

We would suggest that, if journalistic mistakes tend towards **not questioning power enough** rather than questioning it too much (as journalists boldly claim) – or reveal some other bias such as continued defamation of the left – then this will be valuable data to collect.



Andrew Neil looking suspiciously pally with former PMs at the Spectator Garden Party

We will source every claim entered onto the database. As well as being good practice, this will ensure a high bar exists for any “establishment connections” we make.

A connection between two figures will only be entered on the database if it is considered “common knowledge” (reported by one or more mainstream media source(s)) or alluded to by the journalist in an interview.

It is likely, for example, that Laura Kuenssberg and Robert Peston are on friendly terms with a great number of politicians and business figures. They would claim this is part of their jobs (though events like the Spectator Garden Party, where high profile journalists are pictured laughing with the very politicians they supposedly haul over the coals, arguably indicate something more than that)

We will focus on flagging only connections that **clearly go beyond the professional and into the personal**. Given the role influential journalists play in setting the national agenda and “scrutinising power”, it is evidently in the public interest to document factors which may interfere in the performance of this role.



Establishment Criteria

Since much of the database is based around “establishment connections”, we should clarify the criteria we will use to determine if someone qualifies as an “establishment connection”.

Our standard criteria will be as follows: **someone who holds, or has held, a professional role or honorary title that puts them in a position to exert an unusual level of influence on society, and links them to other individuals with similar degrees of influence.** MPs, Lords, business owners/executives/CEOs, mayors, baronets, large landowners, police commissioners and high-ranking civil servants are all clear examples.

There will undoubtedly be some grey areas. A headteacher at a standard secondary school would not be considered an “establishment connection”. A headteacher at Eton or another leading private school *would be* – on the basis that the school has such past and current influence within power structures in Britain that the headteacher will possess influence by proxy. Moreover, it is highly unlikely that someone could ascend to such a position without *themselves* having establishment connections or endorsement/approval from higher echelons.

Likewise, cultural figures such as Rachel Billington, the writer who earned Boris Johnson his first job at the Times, might be considered an establishment connection when comparable cultural figures wouldn't.

Rachel is the daughter of the 7th Earl and Countess of Longford. In addition, both her parents and her aunt, Christine Longford, were authors. This puts Rachel in a vastly different position to authors from less “prestigious” backgrounds. Her prominence is owed to – at the very least, abetted by – existing establishment connections. While having no formal establishment title or position herself, Rachel is nonetheless able to act as an “interconnector” within the elite – e.g. when she used her existing connections to give Boris Johnson a career boost. This is a role that sons, daughters, sisters and brothers of prominent establishment figures undoubtedly play – and will be considered for the database.

Usually, we believe it will be self-evident that a connection possesses significant influence or interconnections in the upper-echelons of British society.

In cases where this is in doubt, we will provide written justification for considering the connection part of “the Establishment”, as in the examples immediately above.