

Press Wars

Julian Petley

Ever since Brexit, papers such as *The Times*, *Mail*, *Telegraph* and *Sun* have complained bitterly that the liberal media in the States, and in particular the *New York Times*, have represented the UK in a highly negative and distorted manner. In short, to quote Charles Moore in the *Telegraph*, 28 October, as 'a hellhole of racism and xenophobia'.

However, since August, and in particular the Queen's death, complaint has tuned to rage and distemper. For example, in an article in the *Mail*, 2 August, headed "Why do the useful idiots at *The New York Times* keep putting the boot into Brexit Britain when it's America that's a crime-ravaged basket case being torn apart by wokery?", Andrew Neil declares "when it comes to Britain you can't trust a word it says". In the *Telegraph*, 7 September, Madeline Grant, in an article headed "The American Left has a vendetta against Britain", argues that the paper's UK coverage "has moved beyond parody ... Everything, however mundane, is a symbol of national decline. Everyone is nostalgic for the empire, or racist". Oliver Kamm in the same day's *Times* accuses it of conducting a "weird vendetta" and laments: "What a meretricious spectacle this once-esteemed title has become". Two days later in the *Telegraph*, Sam Ashworth-Hayes observes that its coverage is "marked above all other things by a seething hatred of Britain", and in the same paper on 10 September, Douglas Murray opines that the paper which he calls "a poisonous rag" has "developed a strange and intense loathing of Britain".

A number of papers quote a remark by Lord Tebbit to the effect that "the *New York Times* is now well known for being a very anti-British newspaper. This is not a surprise but feels particularly egregious in the wake of the Queen's death. It's the sort of scum that rises to the top of dirty water". In *The Times*, 11 September, Rod Liddle lambasts the "dim-witted observations by critical race theorists in the world's worst newspaper", and a *Sun* editorial, 16 September, lays into its journalists as "woke infants". A section headed "New York whines" in a comment

column in the *Mail*, 16 September, compares the paper to a “demented stalker” and rages that “ever since we voted for Brexit, the sanctimonious left-wing rag has launched a fusillade of gratuitous attacks against us”.

Andrew Neil returns in the *Mail*, 16 September, to opine that the *NYT*’s “bile and bilge when it comes to Britain knows no bounds” and to damn its coverage as “ludicrously malevolent”. Zoe Strimpel in the *Telegraph*, 17 September, calls it “one of the most anti-Britain newspapers”, and in the *Mail*, 29 September, Dominic Sandbrook dismisses it as a “woke newsletter” which “never misses an opportunity to traduce and sneer at Britain”. And finally, on 28 October in the *Telegraph*, Charles Moore argues that the paper “must be the most anti-British publication outside Putin’s Russia”.

This is only a small selection from a considerable corpus of articles, but it is enough to give a clear impression of the enraged tone of these newspapers’ coverage of the *NYT* from August onwards. So what has caused such fury on this occasion?

In fact, the targets of their wrath were only a few articles, but the British titles circled around these quite obsessively. Furthermore, all but one of these is very clearly labelled Opinion, something which is not exactly in short supply as far as the *NYT*’s accusers are concerned – and, in their cases, not simply in the op-ed pages either. Nor are these titles backwards in coming forwards when it comes to making negative comments about foreign countries – particularly if they are EU ones.

The earliest article cited was from 15 August 2018, and concerns the culinary revolution in London. According to its author, Robert Draper: “This otherwise noble capital inclining its palate to devotees of porridge and boiled mutton was never a thing to celebrate”. But now however, “no longer can it be said that London is only a great city between meals. What was once a sallow and predictable dining experience is now salubrious and full of surprises, befitting a metropolis of such diversity and ingenuity”. But both Neil in the *Mail*, 2 August, and Guy Adams in the same paper, 16 September, failed entirely to communicate to their readers that the

vast bulk of the article fulsomely *praised* contemporary London cuisine. Furthermore, if one takes the very brief remark about porridge and mutton in its full context, and if one isn't in search of an axe-grinding opportunity, it comes across as nothing more than a flippant *aperçu* and not as a factual description of the recent dining habits of Londoners.

Another piece which caused various British journalists to have conniptions was a video published in the paper on 5 September by Jonathan Pie, a fictional British political correspondent created by the actor and comedian Tom Walker. Although those journalists who attacked it did fleetingly admit that the video is satirical, their rage (and perhaps lack of a sense of humour) appears to have made them lose sight of the fact that the purpose of satire is to satirise. In fact the video's tone is not that different from *Have I Got News for You* and it's actually less abrasive than Radio 4's *Alexei Sayle's Imaginary Sandwich Bar*, although of course the papers which denounce the *NYT* as "left wing" routinely lay the same charge against the BBC. But for Grant in the *Telegraph* to dismiss as "unhinged" Pie's remark that "you can't get in or out of the country because of airline staff shortages and queues at border control" suggests both that she doesn't grasp the bounds of satire and that she hasn't tried to leave the country in busy periods via Dover, the Channel Tunnel and St Pancras International.

As already noted, one of the ways in which these articles make their case is via highly selective quotation. This can best be illustrated by the furore over a lengthy opinion piece headed "Mourn the Queen, not her empire", published on 8 September. This was written by the Harvard history professor Maya Jasanoff, author of the award winning books *The Dawn Watch: Joseph Conrad in a Global World* and *Edge of Empire: Lives, Culture, and Conquest in the East, 1750-1850*, although she was tagged by Douglas Murray in *The Times* as a "grievance studies professor" and by Guy Adams in the *Mail* an "expert in grievance studies". Of course, no such absurd discipline exists, but inventing it, along with the "grievance industry", is simply a snide and lazy way for right-wing papers to disparage and dismiss ideas which they dislike as opposed to engaging critically with them.

The article argues that:

The queen embodied a profound, sincere commitment to her duties – her final public act was to appoint her 15th prime minister – and for her unflagging performance of them, she will be rightly mourned. She has been a fixture of stability, and her death in already turbulent times will send ripples of sadness around the world. But we should not romanticize her era. For the queen was also an image: the face of a nation that, during the course of her reign, witnessed the dissolution of nearly the entire British Empire into some 50 independent states and significantly reduced global influence. By design as much as by the accident of her long life, her presence as head of state and head of the Commonwealth, an association of Britain and its former colonies, put a stolid traditionalist front over decades of violent upheaval. As such, the queen helped obscure a bloody history of decolonization whose proportions and legacies have yet to be adequately acknowledged.

After noting how this bloody history played out in the so-called “emergencies” in Malaya, Kenya, Aden and Cyprus, the article goes on to argue that:

In Ireland, the Troubles brought the dynamics of emergency to the United Kingdom. In a karmic turn, the Irish Republican Army assassinated the queen’s relative Lord Louis Mountbatten, the last viceroy of India (and the architect of Elizabeth’s marriage to his nephew, Prince Philip), in 1979.

Only by quoting from the article at some length is it possible to illustrate just how distorted and partial was the reporting of it in sections of the British press. Thus Murray in *The Times* and Strimpel in the *Telegraph* concentrated to the exclusion of almost everything else on the sentence about “bloody history”, although this didn’t prevent the latter from accusing Jasanoff – twice – of being reductive. In the *Mail*, Adams added the remark about the “karmic turn”, which he called “particularly vile”, and this also aroused the ire of Caroline Graham and Jake Ryan in the *Mail*, 11 September, in an article headed “Now *New York Times* condemned for article that called murder of Mountbatten ‘karmic’”. The latter suggested via an anonymous source who

worked for the *NYT* that this meant that “Mountbatten’s murder was somehow deserved” whilst Adams simply quoted the OED’s informal definition of the word as meaning “good or bad luck, especially as a result of one’s own actions”. However, taken in its full context, “karmic” here suggests not that Mountbatten deserved or was responsible for his death but, rather, that he was the victim of a process of events coming full circle.

Other *NYT* articles that inspired the wrath of British journalists include “Britain is drowning itself in nostalgia”, Sam Byers, 23 March 2019; “Requiem for a dream”, Roger Cohen, 31 January 2020; “The fantasy of Brexit Britain is over”, Richard Seymour, 20 July 2022; and “My father fought for the British Empire. I reject its myths”, Hari Kunzru, 11 September 2022. Significantly, URLs provided in British journalists’ execrations of these articles and those discussed in more detail in this piece never take the reader to the original *NYT* articles themselves but simply to other entries in the catalogue of maledictions that is the subject of this piece.

Most of the main charges against the *NYT* will be clear by now, but some of the underlying themes of this campaign bear closer examination.

Firstly, the *NYT* stands accused of pandering to anti-British sentiment in the Democratic party – in particular to Irish-American voters and what Grant in the *Telegraph* refers to as “Joe Biden’s rambling Irish-American schtick”. Gerard Baker in *The Times*, 15 September, links this with what he perceives as a hatred of Brexit among the Democrats – because it “transgresses against their world view of ever closer global political integration” – and argues that “this anti-Brexit and pro-Irish leaning underscores the hard line Biden and his Democratic colleagues who control Congress are likely to press over the new government’s efforts to undo the Brexit protocol”.

A second charge is that the *NYT* is running these articles for commercial reasons. Thus Ashworth-Hayes in the *Telegraph* claims that the paper’s main reason for its “irritating proselytising” is that “it’s profitable to be a hater”. He continues:

The *New York Times* is a (regrettably) successful money-making enterprise. It publishes these articles because they work to bring in attention; they are deliberate click-bait, written in the knowledge that people will be angry. Hate clicks are still clicks; hate shares are still shares; and eyes on ads are eyes on ads no matter their intention.

Similarly, an editorial in the *Sun*, 16 November, excoriates *NYT* journalists as “hacks so addicted to the social media cesspit that they devote their careers to concocting lies about the UK for ‘likes’”.

Newspapers telling their target readership, for reasons both financial and ideological, what they think they want to hear, and using click-bait to spread their message on social media, isn't exactly unknown in the case of the British papers discussed here, but what really bothers the latter is the nature of the readership to which the *NYT* is appealing. Thus Ashworth-Hayes claims that:

The Britain-bashing is designed for a very specific audience: British people, and in particular self-loathing europhiles. The British newsroom of the *New York Times* has 70 editorial staff, with CVs listing *Buzzfeed*, *gal-dem*, the *Guardian*, and the BBC among others – exactly the sort of people who know how to write for this lucrative market segment.

According to Neil in the *Mail*, the *NYT* has “assembled an impressive array of Britain-haters to spread their bile. Interestingly, they're all British (but then we've never been short of British-loathing Brits). But it's unlikely you've ever heard of them”. In the same vein, Murray in the *Telegraph* refers to “the paper's decision to recruit otherwise unemployable hard-Left journalists from Britain”. More accurately, however, they're unemployable only in the kind right-wing papers which so dominate the UK national press – as indeed is the former chief political correspondent of both the *Mail* and *Telegraph*, Peter Osborne, whose devastating exposure on *openDemocracy* of the manner in which certain British national titles were acting as cheerleaders for the Johnson government marked the end of his 30-year career in Fleet Street, and indeed in broadcasting. (He

too has written for the *NYT*, most recently “The Ruination of Britain”, 21 October). Thus these journalists’ “unemployability” is as much a function of the right-wing hegemony that prevails in significant sections of the national press as it is of these writers’ journalistic skills.

And so we come to the ur-theme of the press campaign, the one that underlies all the others discussed above – namely these papers’ obsessive culture war on the chimera of “woke”. This is absolutely classic “unspeak”, as defined by Steven Poole in his 2006 book of the same name, in that “woke” is not a neutral descriptive term but one which carries with it certain *unspoken* assumptions, attitudes and judgements – in this case encapsulating a bitter hostility towards and a toxic caricature of the kinds of liberal values associated with certain forms of identity politics. Such a position is perfectly illustrated by Neil in the *Mail*:

The university campuses, the media and even corporate America are now increasingly in thrall to the Left-liberal ideology of identity politics, better known as wokery. Even powerful people are afraid to say what they think, lest it unleashes a social media lynch mob against them. A groupthink which tolerates no deviation on racial or gender matters is in the ascendency, snuffing out free speech in the process. It started in America's universities, especially the elite ones, more than a decade ago. That generation of students has now moved into the country's newsrooms and boardrooms, taking their wokery with them. With only a few exceptions, American media is now pretty much a one-party state when it comes to such matters, with *The New York Times* the cream of the crop.

Neil may here portray this invasion of the media by the “woke” as a relatively recent phenomenon, but in fact he made a remarkably similar charge in his 1996 book *Full Disclosure*. In it he complained of a “depressing monotone” in most US television news output, and argued that the news programmes broadcast by the three main networks

are all produced and presented by journalists who generally share the same liberal-left attitudes and agenda of the East Coast media establishment. Since that same outlook and agenda also dominates the leading big-city newspapers (the *New York Times*, *Washington*

Post and *Los Angeles Times*) and the main weekly news magazines (*Time* and *Newsweek*) it means that news in America, despite the variety of outlets, is something of a one-party state.

Of course, Neil failed to break the US journalistic mould at Fox television in 1994 with his *Full Disclosure* news programme which, he told the *Washington Post*, 30 August, he wanted to fill with “stories with ‘attitude’, stories that ‘cause trouble’, stories that ‘tweak the Establishment here, like we did in Britain’”. But this never even made it to air, and whilst it would be uncharitable to suggest that this might help to explain Neil’s dyspeptic attitude towards much US journalism, the programme’s failure does suggest a significant gulf between dominant models of journalism in the US and the UK, one which, in the case of sections of the British press and the kind of classic liberal journalism represented by the *NYT*, has now widened into a yawning chasm.

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