
Taking the
PARTY



out of
POLITICS

HOW IT'S SUPPOSED TO WORK
- WHY IT ISN'T WORKING -
AND HOW TO FIX IT.

Hello and Welcome to *Taking the Party out of Politics!*

This is a podcast about understanding how politics is supposed to work, ...
... why it isn't working as well as it should be working, ...
... and what we might be able to do about it.

Because:

by understanding a little bit more clearly *how* things are supposed to work,
and *why* they are a bit messed up,
we *might* be able to get things to work a *bit better*. Perhaps even a *lot better*.

This is a little journey we are taking together, about the systems and functioning of Politics:
systems which we should all understand, because those systems affect all of our lives, all of
the time.

And this podcast is about how we might be able to make those systems work a bit better.

In Season 1, we took a look at how government is supposed to work, from the perspective of
us – the voters.

This is Season 2, in which we are looking at how government is supposed to work, from the
perspective of someone trying to get elected, and then trying to do a good job.

Looking ahead, in Season 3, we will be looking at what we might be able to do, to make
things work a bit better. Importantly, when we get to Season 3, we will be sharing our ideas,
but also sharing some of the best of YOUR ideas, about how to make things work a bit
better.

Today we're going to have a look at **The Media** – specifically, what sort of influence the
Media can actually have, what sort of difference that can make to our politicians, to our laws
and to how those laws are applied ... and also just the Media fits into anything approaching
a process of real democratic representation.

So far, the whole process isn't working properly for our elected representatives – our
MPs. In Season 1, we looked at how hard it is for voters to make the electoral system to
work properly, so that the people whom we elect are likely to be good representatives –
representing us, and representing our needs and preferences. So far in Season 2, we have
looked at how hard it is for a new MP to get elected, how hard it is for a new MP to work out
how to be effective once they *are* elected, and then how the systems within Parliament mean
that much of their work is then controlled by party whips, or bullied into line by Ministers, or
simply by-passed ... by having secondary legislation slipped into bills at the last minute.
It's difficult to get elected, and then once you are elected it is difficult to achieve much, you're
overworked, and you're expected to just go with the flow.
On top of all of that, our elected representatives have to deal with the Media.

1.1.1. Media Expectations Media Expectations

The media. The fourth estate.

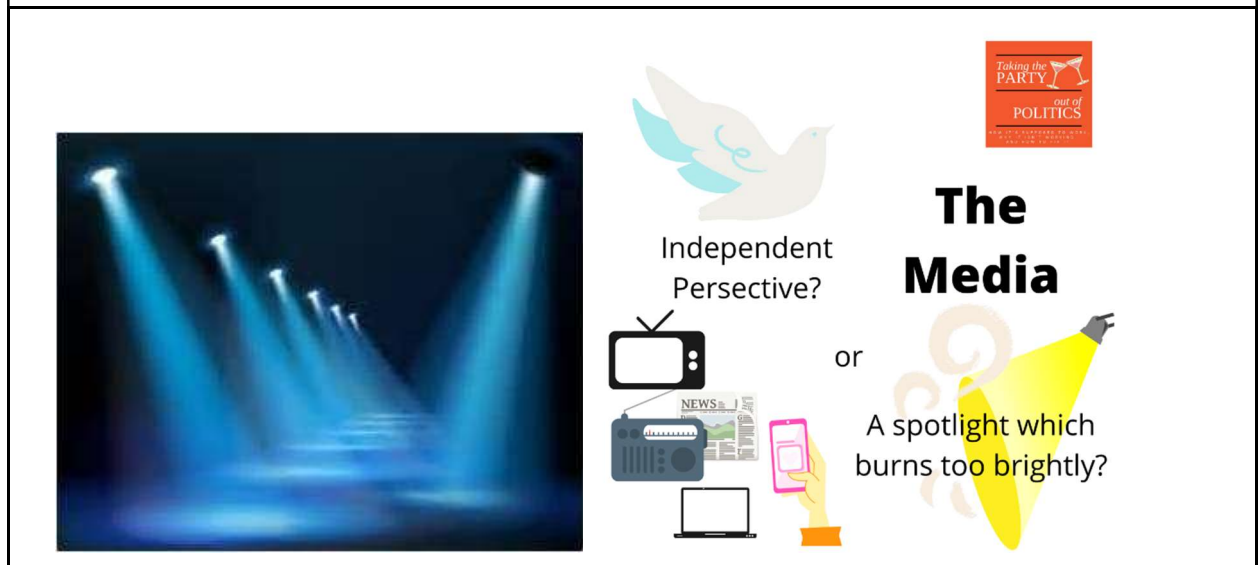
(So-called because of its supposed independence from

1. the Church of England,
2. the House of Lords and
3. the House of Commons)

The media has a funny status in the UK.

It's really important to have an independent perspective on what politicians do. Or civil servants. Or government. Business people. The military ... in fact, any organisation or person which wields disproportionate power over us, or on our behalf.

But that perspective can be a spotlight which burns too brightly.



Or, to put it another way, it is important that we have a media which keeps us up to date. But it is not necessarily important to have a media which believes that it can tell us what to think.

As has been said in many ways, in many different places:

I don't want you to tell me what to think.

I want you to tell me to think, and to give me the tools I need to help me to think for myself.

So, let's think about some of the problems which our media can throw into the mix:

First problem:

Some journalists appear to think that they are not only checking up on how our politicians are behaving, but that they actually know better than the politicians.

Well, if they really do know better, then they really ought to be in politics, not sitting safely on the side lines taking pot shots at those people who are prepared to put up with the challenges of public life in order to (try to) make things a bit better for the rest of us.



The Media

Taking
potshots
from the
sidelines



... but do they
really know
better than our
politicians?

It is easy to sit in an armchair at home, and to say that you know better than the manager of your football team, or the person who just said something stupid on a game show, or even a politician who just said something less than helpful.

But is it not easy to manage a football team. Especially not if the pressure of expectation of the whole country is weighing heavily upon you, for example if you are the manager of the national team.

Is it really likely that everyone who is in your local pub and who feels that they can shout at the TV – is it really likely that they all know better than the professional, experienced, carefully selected manager? Well, of course, we can all think of occasions when we might have believed that was true. Particularly when we think back to some of those managers.

But, on the whole, just because you can shout at the TV, that doesn't make you an expert.

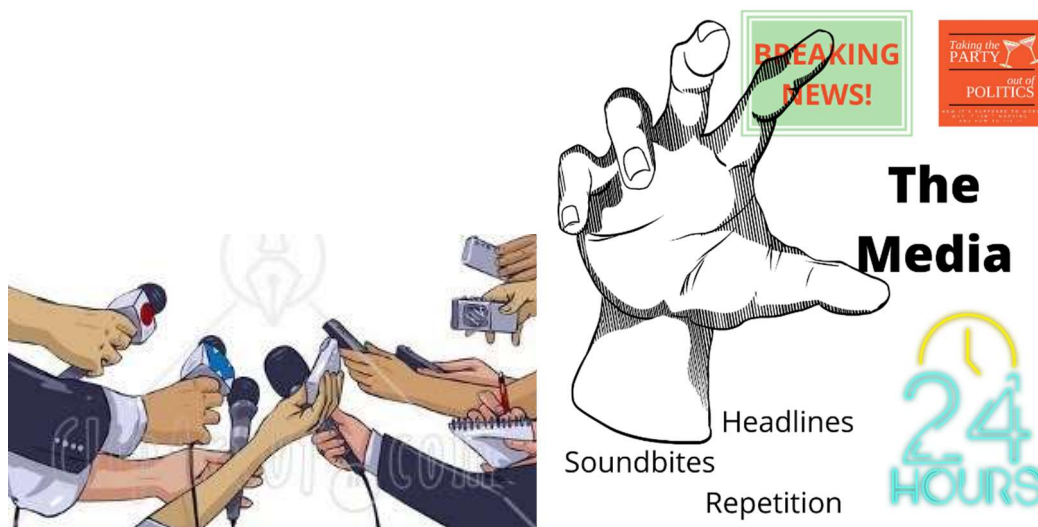
And, just because you have a column in a national newspaper, that doesn't mean that you are the only person who really understands this. It doesn't mean that you are the best person to be making national policy. It just means that you have a column in a national newspaper.

And, to be honest, if you really are the best person to be making national policy – well, then why aren't you rolling up your sleeves, standing for election, getting stuck in, and helping to make our national policy as good as it can be?

Second problem: Time. Sound bites. Air space.

The pressures of the 24-hour media culture, combined with our ever-diminishing attention spans, encourages politicians to:

- Try to grab headlines and airtime,
- Simultaneously dumb down what they actually say into shorter and shorter sound bites,
- Eventually adding nothing, or next to nothing.
- Play to our less proud fears and concerns.



At the same time, the same 24-hour media culture means that journalists are pushed into sensationalising everything, to grab our attention. It also means that journalists are pushed into speculating and analysing the news to death, until it can be hard to tell what is actually news and what is just opinion, conjecture, and guesswork.

Do we really need to know what the experts think that the Chancellor is going to say (perhaps, in anything more than outline)? Let's just wait for him or her to say it.

As Jess Phillips MP says, in her book 'Everything you really need to know about politics, this leads to "MPs either obsessing about what might potentially blow up into a story and consequently not getting anything done, or ... calling for something (ridiculous which) they know they are never going to get and using the guaranteed media attention to their advantage. In other words, this kind of press coverage favours boring, cautious politicians or ones who will seek to manipulate (the media). Neither is good."¹

¹ Jess Phillips *Everything You Really Need to Know about Politics* (2020) p 182

Third Problem: 80% of UK media is owned by just 5 people.

Yes. That's right. Some estimates are that something like 80% of UK media outlets (and by media outlets, I mean TV channels, but also radio, and newspapers). Depending on exactly how you read the statistics, perhaps 80% of it is owned by just 5 people.

If you ask yourself the question 'Why become a journalist, if you know all the right answers, rather than become a politician?', then think how much more layered the answer is if you ask the question 'Why would you want to own a newspaper?' (or a TV channel, or a radio station, for that matter). Some of them make money – although, in a world in which online advertising has undercut an awful lot of the advertising income for the media; particularly since it can be so personalised, so targeted, and therefore so much more effective. But it's not an obvious way to make money.

Surely the answer must be something along the lines of 'Because it gives you a platform'. A platform for your opinions. A platform for what you think needs to be said – and heard. And a platform for you to have some element of power. Unelected power.

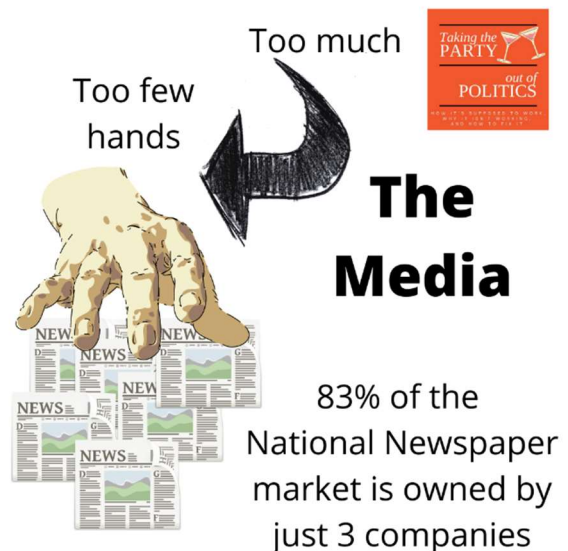
Media outlets are certainly a voice we all hear. Whether you trust the BBC, or The Sun, or The National Enquirer as a disinterested, dispassionate source of information – information for you to make up your own mind about things – well, probably none of them is really independent. Even with the best of intentions, media channels such as the BBC is certainly biased at times. Perhaps biased in a way in which it intends to help us, to do things which are 'good for us'. But it's still biased.

And the BBC is owned by us.

What about the 80% of UK media being owned by just 5 people?

Well, it can depend on exactly how you count. Is it the number of newspapers (The Sun, The Times, etc) which counts, or is it the number of readers which each one has?

According to a 2016 article in The Independent²: "Just two individuals - Rupert Murdoch and Lord Rothermere - controlled a staggering 52.2 per cent of online and print national news publications in the UK in 2013"



² <https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/british-people-think-their-media-most-biased-and-right-wing-europe-and-they-re-probably-right-a6860911.html>

Or, in a report from the Media Reform Coalition in 2019: “just three companies (News UK, DMG and Reach) dominate 83% of the national newspaper market (up from 71% in 2015)”³.

On the surface, we might think that there are so many newspapers out there (or TV channels, or radio channels) that we are bound to be well served. They are bound to be impartial, and to give us just information.

But, with the news that so much of our media intake is focused in so few hands – does it still feel like that? Are we ever really likely to get a balanced picture? And are the few (very few) individuals, at the top of those organisations controlling all of those media outlets, going to have more influence over our elected politicians than might be healthy. Healthy for the politicians. Healthy for the information we get – or perhaps don’t get – about our politicians. Healthy for our political system.

What’s your feeling on that?

³ <https://www.mediareform.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/FINALonline2.pdf>

Fourth Problem: The digital nature of news

In theory, the internet ought to be a good thing. Facebook. Twitter. Google. Blogs. Websites. Comments at the end of online articles. Anyone can publish anything, so there are no restrictions. If there is a story about some great industrial tycoon doing wrong, or a story about a politician doing the wrong thing, then the internet means that anyone can publish that information, and get it out there to all of us. There's no barrier. No going through whether or not one of the few people who control the media want to publish the story. That ought to be good. Right?

But, in actual fact, that lack of restrictions means that absolutely anyone can publish anything.

And there are two problems with that

First, there's no quality control. There's no checking the accuracy of the facts that are being put out there. (That's why we invite you to have a look at the links on our website – you can check out anything we say, and go straight to our sources).

Second, because there is so much information out there, we can't possibly scrutinise it all. We can't possibly trawl our way through everything, every day, to work out which are good stories, accurate stories, important stories, and which ones are made up. Or which ones have a particular agenda, a particular axe to grind.



As a result, we rely on different ways of filtering the news for us. Perhaps you visit the website of a newspaper which you feel that you can (mostly trust). Perhaps you are a Twitter demon, and feel that you are able to get the story, direct from the people who are telling the story. Perhaps you just get your news from your group of friends on Facebook. Or just from the people whom you have decided to follow on Twitter, or any other social media platform.

But that's all just another recipe for getting a skewed perspective on the

news. We call it an internet bubble, or echo chamber. You and your friends might tend to have similar views on things, or to be worried about similar things – whether that thing is what we can do to stop Climate Change or how we could all work together to get Donald Trump re-elected (please don't do that, by the way). As a result of your internet bubble, you will tend to see your friends – those ones with similar views – telling you the same sorts of things, and eventually you might come to believe that this is the only way of seeing things. The same ideas bounce around, like an echo in a

valley, and come back to you. Again, and again. You hear them once, and you might doubt it. But when you hear it 20 times, then with the best will in the world you might start to wonder if it might be actually true.

On top of that, the amazing reach of the internet, with no peer-review, it's all made worse by what we have come to know as fake news. And to add to that, there are trolls, people (or perhaps automated 'bots') out there to spread fake news, or to direct you to certain ideas, or websites, or blogs, or stories. You may have heard the name Cambridge Analytica. Cambridge Analytica was a company which claimed that it could spread information on the internet in such a way as to swing the US election. Without getting into whether they actually did, or could, the fact is that even if Cambridge Analytica didn't do it in 2016 (or, perhaps, was boasting that it could do more than it really could do), other people and organisations are certainly going to be interested to try.

The sort of internet bubble which you might have with your friends and the people whom you follow on social media ... well you add in something like what Cambridge Analytica was trying to do (or claiming it could do), and you have you and your friends, but now powered by some super energy drink.

If a rumour starts that a politician is doing this, or should be doing that – and it bounces around in your internet bubble echo chamber, and then some techy fairy dust is sprinkled on it, and it comes back around your internet bubble but now with new (perhaps invented?) information – well, how is a politician supposed to manage that? How is a good politician – perhaps one who is challenging gun laws in America, and so who has got a lot of vested interests lined up against them, or perhaps one who is trying to get something done which will help to control Climate Change, and so who has got another whole load of vested interests lined up against them – how is that politician going to survive, in a world where supercharged rumours are flying around the internet, all trying to discredit them, or otherwise undermine what they are trying to do?

Fifth Problem:

We should also remember that it is the nature of news to be mostly negative.

Very few good things happen in the world in newsworthy chunks.

Good things tend to happen slowly. There are exceptions. Your team winning the Champions League final, for example. Though, of course, as an England supporter, we know that we will almost certainly lose to the Germans on penalties, even before the match starts, so there are probably just as many negative sport stories as positive ones!

The world gets better slowly. But that slow, incremental improvement isn't headline-grabbing stuff. It's the sort of stuff which appears on the radar only of people who follow statistics and data – oddly, it means that people like economists, have a more positive view of the world than most of us (apparently!).

Bad things can happen in sudden lurches.

Natural disasters, for example.

But bad things make good news.

It is the nature of news to be a sort of a warning system about what can go wrong in the world. It might rain – take a coat today. There are roadworks on your route to work – allow extra time. There are hijackers in the world – um, well, perhaps there isn't an awful lot that an individual can do about that. But it still makes the news.

It might not be newsworthy, but today, billions of people had a pretty ordinary day. Actually, billions of people laughed today. Billions of people didn't have an accident, and billions of people didn't die. Or get swindled out of their pension fund.

I don't mean to be glib. For the person who did get swindled out of their pension fund – that's awful. I mean – how does the person who does that to someone who has worked all their life and just retired, how does that person sleep at night? I really don't know.

But it didn't happen to most people.

The fact that it didn't happen to most people isn't newsworthy. We are kind of supposed to just be able to put it all into context, and remember that everyone who WASN'T mentioned on the news today is OK. Or perhaps better than just OK.



But that can be difficult. As the song goes “the news contrives to frighten you”⁴. And the news can seem very negative. Particularly on some days.

That doesn’t mean that we should switch off. It doesn’t mean that we shouldn’t pay attention to what is going on in the world. But it does take a lot of effort to keep it all in context, sometimes.

What we actually need is less news, and less pretence that it is all urgent news.

There is urgent news in the world, and we do need to hear it.

But journalists speculating about what one of our MPs is going to say later today isn't urgent. It can wait until it's been said.

And even then, it can probably wait until the journalist has properly analysed the detail and the implications.



⁴ <https://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/morrissey/spentthedayinbed.html>

Added to this, we must not lose sight of the fact that the media is a business.

The competition for our attention is a competition which will affect ratings. And ratings affect how much advertising can be sold, or at the very least, how much public funding can be justified.

The media business regards us as consumers of information, and so the information is packaged. Packaged to attract our attention. Packaged to play to our presumptions about the world. Packaged to ensure that we consumer.

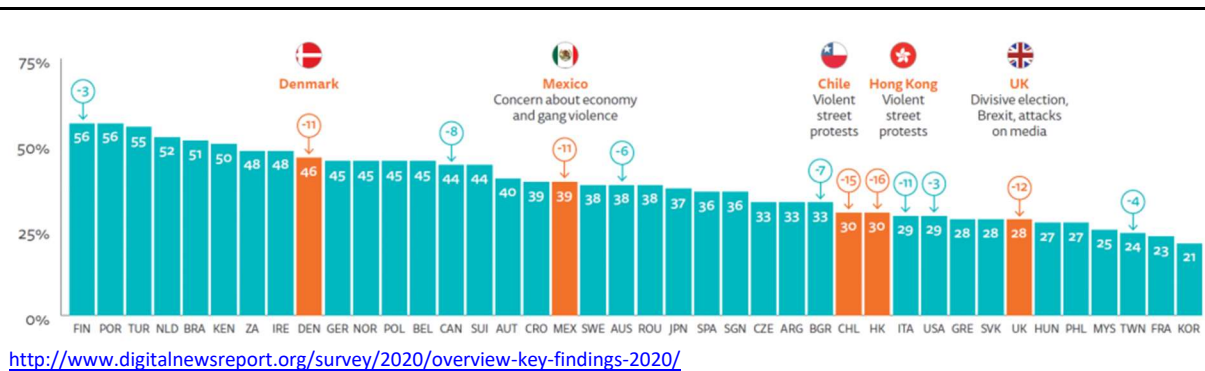
The sort of scrutiny which is conducted by the best media (Watergate, not phone hacking) is incredibly valuable. But far too much of it is not driven by our best interests – it is driven either by the demands of being a business, or perhaps by the political agenda of the editor or proprietor.

There is a space for the best sort of scrutiny. But perhaps the best place for it is not in a competition for attention. Perhaps it could be combined with the best, dispassionate, public funded scrutiny. We will come to the idea of citizen scrutiny later.

The impacts of all these different pressures on the media include:

- We stop listening
- We only listen when it 'sounds' really exciting
- We stop trusting what we hear

For example, the Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2020⁵ sets out that only 28% of the UK public agree that they can trust most news most of the time.



And that's not good for anyone.

⁵ https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2020-06/DNR_2020_FINAL.pdf

In the meantime

Good politicians deserve our respect. Not all politicians. Some of them absolutely don't deserve our respect. But there are some good ones who do.

They are prepared to consider braving this 'trial by media' just to be able to have an opportunity to do some good.

At least, let's give them the benefit of the doubt, and focus on the good ones – even if there are some rotten apples.

Common
Good

But the system isn't one which encourages the average person to *want* to stand for election, simply to be given grief by highly intelligent, well spoken – *but under-challenged* – journalists in search of a quick headline.

And the system isn't one which encourages someone to stand for just a few years, for a term or two, to make their contribution.

These politicians have been in the party for years and years, gradually edging towards getting their turn.



GOVERNMENT ?

We end up with *unrepresentative* representatives – drawn from the same pool of people who are prepared to work through the political party system – mostly arguing that the other lot are always wrong, rather than searching for any bits which might be mostly right.

And we end up with a government which isn't doing what we want it to do.

We need a different way of structuring the way we use the current system.



What we actually need from the media is properly considered, succinct summaries of the really important stuff, so that we can use that information to make up our own minds.

We're not children.

We don't need a wise and masterful wizard hiding behind the curtain to lead us.

We do need competent administrators to make it all happen.

But in most instances today, we could tell our representatives what we want them to do – if only they would just settle down, stop shouting the odds, and simply provide us with the simple facts; the basic pros and cons of each decision.



The essential details

Why can't the media be doing that?

Again, as Jess Phillips MP says: "We need to find a balance where ... politicians can be held firmly to account by the press ... while at the same time the press more fairly highlights all that politics is and does."⁶

Then perhaps more of us would actually trust what we hear and read.

Balanced.

Succinct, but simple. Both sides of each issue.

Here it all is in a few bullet points.

Not telling you what to think.

Just giving you the information you need to be able to make up your own mind.



Unless, of course, you have some different ideas. Some suggestions as to how things could be different. Perhaps about how we could use our systems differently, or about how we could tweak them so that they worked better, in all of our interests.

If you have any ideas, we would love to hear from you. In Season Three of *Taking the Party out of Politics*, we will be exploring various ideas about how we could make things better. And we would love to hear from you. Just email us with your ideas, on info@talktogether.info. If your ideas are good – or if they help us to understand things more clearly – then we will include them in Season Three. We might even contact you, to interview you about your suggestions! We look forward to hearing *your* thoughts.

* * *

⁶ Jess Phillips *Everything You Really Need to Know about Politics* (2020) p 183

Next time, we're going to look a bit more at what we call the **Wicked Issues**.

That's the stuff which we all know is really important, but which our politicians don't get round to dealing with. Because our politicians believe that we wouldn't re-elect them if they did. Well, perhaps when they are faced with a barrage of unhelpful media attention, always interested in a quick bit of sensationalism to grab our attentions, perhaps those politicians are right. Perhaps we wouldn't re-elect them if they dealt with the Wicked Issues. Not if we live in a fog of only what our journalists and media outlets want us to hear.

Well, next time we're going to have a look at all of that.

For now, thank you for listening.

If you would like to have a look at transcripts of the podcast, including links to all of our sources and references, please go to www.talktogether.info, and follow the links to the Podcast from there. And, of course, if you would like to contact us – not least if you would like to share any ideas which you have about how we could make things better, or if there are any areas of how Politics is supposed to work, but why it isn't working – then please email us at any time on info@talktogether.info.

If you have enjoyed this podcast, then I hope that you will take the time to tell your friends. And perhaps you could also take a moment to give us a rating wherever you found us – that not only helps other people to find us; it also just really makes us feel appreciated. 😊

That would be great. Thank you.
