Podcast: ‘Why is the media in the UK so closely integrated with mainstream politics?’

Hello and welcome back to the show.

There’s no question that the media apparatus in the United Kingdom is heavily integrated with the mainstream political establishment. From the director general of the BBC being appointed by the government to political donations made by the owners of the biggest media companies in the country to MP’s and party leaders, the fact is that there is a high level of interaction and integration between the media and political classes in the UK. But why exactly is this? While some may say that its simply a matter of ‘following the money’, and others may deny that any integration even exists, the issue goes far deeper than being one of profits. So in this episode, I aim to answer the question: Why exactly is the Media Establishment in the UK so closely integrated with mainstream politics?

In order to answer this question, we first need to understand the media landscape of the United Kingdom. According to the Media Reform Coalition’s 2021 paper titled ‘Who owns the UK Media?’, there is a significant bias towards Centre-Right to Right Wing media outlets within the UK media landscape. In its section on national newspapers alone, all but one of the top four newspapers with the highest market share are well known to hold right wing views, these being the Sun, The Daily Mail, and the Daily Telegraph, with the only exception being the Daily Mirror. In addition, more left-leaning outlets clearly hold the lowest market share, with the Guardian and the Independent holding just 2.5% and 0.8% of the total market share respectively. However, the paper also makes clear that regarding market share, there has been a significant drop in the market share of all major national newspaper outlets. This is, at least in part, if not primarily, due to the rise of the internet as a means of disseminating news media.

Which brings us to the ownership of these outlets. According to the data cited in the paper, all national newspaper publishers are owned by just eight companies, with the Rupert Murdoch owned NewsCorp UK & Ireland holding the largest share of the market at 29.3%. The value of this data cannot be understated. The fact that so few companies hold such a sway over public discourse is a clear indicator of the fact that we do not in fact have a free and open media landscape in the UK. But what exactly does this have to do with the integration between the media and our political establishment? Well, aside from the fact that the viewpoints espoused by our most popular media outlets more often than not align with the views of the government, particularly regarding issues of immigration, policing, and economics, it is a well-known fact that the Conservative party and right-wing politicians also receive donations from wealthy individuals in exchange for significant rewards for these donations. For example, Richard Sharp, the now former director-general of the BBC, was reported by the guardian to have donated over £400,000 to the conservative party, and was also found to have helped in securing a loan of £800,000 to former prime minister Boris Johnson during his tenure as prime minister. While this is just a singular case of this happening, it is by no means unique, nor is it a recent occurrence, as shown by the strong relationship between former prime minister Tony Blair and NewsCorp owner Rupert Murdoch, with the former being the godfather to the latter’s granddaughter. With this in mind, is it really so surprising that the political establishment of the United Kingdom is so heavily integrated with the mainstream media?

However, that’s not to say that there aren’t truly independent media outlets actively working to provide a genuine alternative to the mainstream media narrative regarding politics. From podcasts like Revolutionary Left Radio, to online media outlets such as Novara Media and The Canary UK, over the last few years there has been a surge in alternative media outlets, predominantly with a more radical and left-wing perspective, that have been making significant gains in regard to their prominence. For example, at the time of this being recorded, Novara Media currently stands at 327,000 subscribers to their YouTube Channel, with 10,000 people actively providing financial support in the form of donations due to the nature of how the outlet is run. However, while the majority of alternatives to the mainstream media do provide a genuine alternative to the established narratives regarding economic and political news, even the alternative news media space is not safe from becoming integrated with the political establishment. I am of course talking about GBNews, owned by the parent company ‘All Perspectives Ltd.’ While it is of course ironic that a company named ‘All Perspectives’ owns, funds, and operates a network most well-known for espousing hard-line right-wing talking points and supporting the government in most cases, the political integration cannot be understated. For example, the MP for Northeast Somerset is a regular fixture on GBNews, not simply as a regular guest, but as someone who actively hosts a show on the channel, titled ‘State of The Nation’. While other forms of integration between the media and political classes are more subtle, such as the aforementioned donations, this example is especially egregious, as it involves someone who actively holds both the role of a legislator, being the minister for Brexit Opportunities and Government Efficiency, as well as the role of a media personality.

So overall, while there is a significant level of integration between the Media and Political establishments of the UK, there is also a growing alternative media landscape that seeks to challenge the established narratives, and to provide genuine left-wing perspectives on current affairs regarding politics, economics, and social issues, although even these alternatives must remain wary of false alternatives like GBNews, who present themselves as radical alternatives, while actively espousing and supporting mainstream political narratives. Furthermore, the integration mentioned previously continues to influence mainstream narratives, as if someone like Richard Sharp, a man who was previously a director for the Conservative Think Tank ‘Centre for Policy Studies, can achieve access to the highest position in state media simply by means of his wallet, can we truly say that our media is independent?