EUROPE 02.03.2020 | Aaron Burnett

Boris vs BBC

The UK Prime Minister wants to slash fees for the public broadcaster. That's straight out of the playbook of Germany's AfD

Read this article in German.

During the 2019 UK General Election, Boris Johnson infamously avoided a live TV interview by ducking into a fridge. As the first—and so far only—major UK party leader not to appear before veteran BBC broadcaster Andrew Neil for an election interview in thirty years, Neil took the unprecedented step of rebuking a sitting Prime Minister on air.

Freshly elected to a new mandate, Johnson advisors now want to scrap the British Broadcasting Corporation's license fee for television owners when the broadcaster's charter comes up for renewal in 2027. In the meantime, the government is considering measures to decriminalise non-payment — potentially depriving the BBC of the means to collect from those who refuse to pay. Estimates hold the BBC could lose up to 75 per cent of its revenue if the fee, amounting to about €185 per household annually, is scrapped.

If that sounds familiar, it's because the German right-wing populist party 'Alternative für Deutschland' (AfD) has been suggesting something similar for years. In an unsettling development for media freedom advocates, and for progressive and liberal democrats around the world, it's no longer necessary to look to a place like Orban's Hungary for media crackdowns. The beginnings of one can already be seen in one of Europe's more advanced democracies — the UK. Similar to Hungary's ruling Fidesz or Germany's AfD, Johnson's Conservative Party has kicked off a sophisticated process to interfere in Britain's media landscape. The objective is to undermine critical journalism.

Solidarity between journalists

As with Johnson's current Cabinet, AfD advocates abolishing the mandatory fee all German households pay for the country's public

broadcasters, calling it a measure to promote 'free and independent' media. The AfD's Bundestag contingent even went so far as to host a conference of 'free media,' that contained a sort of 'Who's Who' of far-right bloggers and YouTubers. Some attendees even suggested AfD parliamentarians should no longer share articles from mainstream outlets, or the 'system press,' on their social media platforms — but only coverage from their 'free media' platforms. AfD parliamentarian and conference host Uwe Schulz called the assembled 'free media' outlets whose reporting was independent of political ideology — implying that Germany's 'system press' are biased.

The closeness between major British tabloids like The Sun and the UK's governing Tories may appear reminiscent of the relationship between Hungary's media oligarchs and Orban's Fidesz.

Johnson's Tories have, in recent years, similarly accused the BBC of political bias. Johnson himself once referred to it as 'the Brexit Bashing Corporation' during the 2019 Conservative leadership race. Much like Donald Trump bans or threatens to ban critical journalists from the White House, Johnson's communications staff recently attempted to bar certain journalists from a technical briefing to be given by the top civil servant on the UK's Brexit team. Invited journalists boycotted the conference *en masse*.

For German observers, it looked very similar to a Brandenburg AfD press conference in 2018, in which journalists staged a mass walkout to protest the AfD's refusal to take questions from BILD. Although solidarity from fellow reporters prevented Number 10 from barring select journalists from its technical briefing, Johnson no longer allows his Cabinet ministers to appear on BBC Radio 4's flagship *Today* program, supposedly due to an alleged anti-Tory, pro-Remain bias.

From the Fox News playbook

While individual reporters may boycott UK government briefings over attempts to ban select outlets, the editorial boards of Britain's major Brexit-supporting tabloids don't necessarily demonstrate similar solidarity, and even speak out in support of Johnson's recent tactics toward the BBC. *The Sun* newspaper, owned by Fox News founder Rupert Murdoch, inserts an editorial comment section, called '*The Sun* says' into many of its news articles. One such excerpt, inserted into a news story about the government's plans to scrap the fee, called on readers to consider how the BBC had 'trashed its once-proud reputation [...] the tedious, institutional liberal-left bias in news, drama, and "comedy." The overpaid executives churning out "woke" bilge, knowing the billions will always keep rolling in.'

The closeness between major British tabloids like *The Sun* and the UK's governing Tories may appear reminiscent of the relationship between Hungary's media oligarchs and Orban's Fidesz. Yet in practice, it bears closer resemblance to the dynamic between Donald Trump and Fox News. While Orban secures the loyalty of media oligarchs by doling out public resources, Britain's tabloids have a history of working to influence public opinion — and the government — on key policies.

For the UK's left and right-wing to accuse the BBC of political bias during and after the same election is quite an achievement for the BBC indeed.

In 2016, they backed Brexit even as then Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron campaigned for a Remain vote. They will often support politicians who share their policy aims, while leveling dangerously populist criticism against those they see as obstructing these aims. Following a 2016 court ruling it perceived as a legal trick to frustrate Brexit, the *Daily Mail* splashed photos of three British High Court judges on its front page, under the headline 'Enemies of the People.'

The threat to democracy is here

In the middle of Britain's often polarised, at times populist and partisan media landscape sits the BBC. Nearly a century old, 75 per cent of British adults access BBC content in some form, whether on television, radio, or online. Just as it faces accusations of bias against Britain's right, the British left has also charged the BBC with bias. Following Labour's worst election result since 1935, shadow transport secretary Andy McDonald complained leader Jeremy Corbyn had been 'unfairly demonised by the media,' including by the BBC.

For the UK's left and right-wing to accuse the BBC of political bias during and after the same election is quite an achievement for the BBC indeed. To get such criticism from both sides of the British political spectrum for its coverage of the same event suggests the BBC is doing something right when it comes to critical journalism and impartial reporting. With the current level of backing the Johnson Tories enjoy from Britain's right-wing tabloid press, BBC journalism is even more distinctive — and important — in Brexit Britain than before.

Johnson's public fight with the BBC serves to highlight a few other hard truths as well. Firstly, the EU is now negotiating with another increasingly populist and authoritarian government on its doorstep. Secondly, attacks on the media as an institution no longer take place only in relatively new democracies. Backsliding on democratic principles can

happen virtually anywhere — even in countries that only a few short years ago seemed like paragons of political and economic stability.



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