

Channel Four News anchor Jon Snow: From mea culpas over Grenfell Tower to demands for censorship

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Channel Four News anchor Jon Snow earned newspaper headlines last month when he delivered some home truths to the British media.

Snow, an urbane, left-leaning and popular figure, presented the McTaggart Lecture at this year's Edinburgh TV Festival to an audience of what he described as "the heart and soul of our industry, the creative forces, producers, directors, owners, managers, editors, employees, the elite, the life force that has even—at times—rendered what we do the envy of the world."

After this obsequious start, some of what Snow said undoubtedly made members of his audience uncomfortable and resonated with the views of wider layers of workers and youth.

His central contention was that the media is disconnected from the "left behind", "the disadvantaged," "the excluded." To reinforce his message, he listed obvious examples of how "mostly London-based media pundits, pollsters and so-called experts have got it wrong": the Brexit referendum, the election of Donald Trump in the US and the poor showing of the UK Conservatives in the general election.

But where his remarks were most effective was in his reference to the Grenfell Tower fire. The "disaster taught me a harrowing lesson that I thought I had already learned, but perhaps forgotten... I believe that we have, by the nature of our business, an obligation to be aware of, connect with, and understand the lives, concerns, and needs of those who are not part of the elite... I believe we are in breach of that obligation—that in increasingly fractured Britain, we are comfortably with the elite, with little awareness, contact, or connection with those not of the elite."

Snow explained how the Grenfell Action Group had repeatedly warned of the fire dangers, whereas "we had

stopped looking." So that when the media descended on Grenfell on the morning of June 15, "Amid the demonstrations around the lower part of the building after the fire there were cries of 'Where were you? Why didn't you come here before?'... I felt on the wrong side of the terrible divide that exists in present day society and in which we are all in this hall, major players."

To underscore his point, Snow stated that, "The completely man-made Grenfell disaster has proved beyond all other things how little we know, and how dangerous the disconnect is."

He put the media "disconnect" down to the privileged strata from which its leading representatives are drawn, as opposed to the lives of millions of working people. He spoke of his own background ("I didn't need to gravitate to the elite—I was born into it!") and how this ended with him occupying a leading position at Channel Four, even though he never trained as a journalist.

From this he generalised: "Britain is not alone in this—our organic links within our own society are badly broken. In part because the echelons from which our media is drawn do not for the most part fully reflect the population, amongst whom we live and to whom we seek to transmit information and ideas..."

"The Sutton Trust has revealed this year that just under 80 percent of top editors were educated at private schools or grammar schools. Compare that with the 88 percent of the British public now in comprehensives."

Snow made a feint at opposing the domination of the media by major corporations, but it was directed at only one, specific manifestation of this. "Never since the rise of the printing press have two companies held such a monopoly over the world's information. Never have such organisations taken so little responsibility for it either," he declared. "It's Facebook and Google to whom I refer."

Mark Zuckerberg's control of Facebook has made news dissemination "vulnerable to the whims of one man," he continued. "Facebook's principles are seldom explained in detail and can change overnight at Mr Zuckerberg's whim."

This is where Snow's positive insights end. His proposals to combat the ills he cites instead confirm that he is indeed a member of the elite and is anxious above all else to safeguard its interests.

Not a word is said about challenging the monopolisation of news media by giant corporations, billionaire owners and governments. The official media, he suggests, can be made more responsive by a commitment to "diversity." This amounts to little more than seeking to hire a few black and brown faces and former comprehensive school pupils—a policy Snow heralds with the grandiose proclamation that "humanity needs to match the dramatic growth of social media with a rebirth of social mobility"!

He also implores media executives to despatch journalists like missionaries to rub shoulders with the hoi polloi. They should allow "individuals who work with and for you the space to do something, anything, in the wider community we are here to communicate with... those people who live outside and beyond our elite."

It is when he deals with Facebook and Google that Snow's "liberalism" fails him and his class loyalties become most apparent. He offers a witches' brew of complaints and proposals based on a central demand that the world's most powerful social media site and search engine collectively regulate the internet.

Supporting the censoring of news content and calling for it to be more effective, Snow complains that the algorithm employed by Google "that prioritised many amazing reports of ours, also prioritised fakery on a massive scale." Likewise, "Facebook has a moral duty to prioritise veracity over virality."

A clever phrase that is used to sugar the bitter pill of censorship.

Snow makes no attempt to detail the "mass fakery" of which he speaks—other than a reference to the claim that the Pope had backed Donald Trump for president and an oblique reference to "conspiracy theories" regarding the Syrian civil war. But he lends tacit support to the anti-democratic efforts of Google, working with the Democratic Party, the Central Intelligence Agency and National Security Agency in the United States and other intelligence agencies elsewhere—to conceal from public view those websites deemed to be conveying "fake news."

This constantly repeated term, together with claims that Russia has utilised the internet to subvert the "democratic process," has been employed as justification for the development of a new algorithm and the hiring of thousands of personnel by Google—with the primary aim of censoring left-wing, progressive and anti-war sites. The *World Socialist Web Site*, whose reportage is never anything but truthful, has been the most affected by Google's supposed efforts to fight what Snow calls the "tyranny of untruth" resulting from an unregulated Internet.

He concludes with an appeal for Facebook and Google to both promote and pay for the services of Channel Four and other major producers of news coverage.

Since the beginning of last year, Snow boasts, Channel Four has had over three billion viewings on Facebook. But whereas the reach provided by social media dwarfs "that of conventional broadcasting, the revenue provided doesn't even come close."

Snow wants Channel Four et al to be given "the rate for the job. Rather than simply trying to take down the fakery, there has to be an incentive for Facebook to pay the rate for high quality news and encourage the development of a global bedrock of truths... Governments, the [European Union] and others have to play an even bigger part in forcing them to pay."

There we have Snow's bottom line.

He has come a long way from his initial admission that the media is an elite organisation, insulated from the mass of the population, to his Orwellian description of the world's media corporations as the "global bedrock of truths" to be sheltered at all costs by the governments who rely on them to control information and "interpret" events.



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