

Summer Reading from The Media Policy Project ...



At the Media Policy Project we are often asked for readings by those wishing to get up to speed on complex policy issues. This is why we produce our [policy briefs](#) and [idiots guides](#). Recently, we have had several requests for briefing on press regulation. As we will be taking a break until 18 August, in a departure from our usual short blog format, **Damian Tambini** provides [A Short Essay: Summer Reading on Press Reform](#).

Press Reform in the UK is stalled. With referendum and election shimmering on a distant, sunlit horizon, and the new Independent Press Standards Organisation (IPSO) strolling around in the Long Grass, this summer holiday is a time for some longer term reflection.

For those that want to get up to speed on the technical detail of post-Leveson reform, [this blog post](#) is still current and there is a reading list [here](#). We have published three [policy briefs](#) related to Leveson implementation; these, and our [archive of blog posts](#) explain why the reforms that were recommended by Leveson are incomplete.

If a reading list from the Media Policy Project sounds a bit heavy for the poolside then have no fear. At LSE Media Policy we believe summer holidays are (also) for novels. These, I would argue, are indispensable if we are to understand the deeper reasons for the current impasse.

Leveson, Politics and the Press: Why Trollope Matters

When Michael Gove was asked by Leveson for his thoughts on inappropriate closeness in relations between politicians and the press, [his answer was 'Twas Ever Thus'](#). Gove might have changed his views about matters of political presentation since then of course, but I have been wondering about his appeal to perpetuity. Everything has a beginning, including press power.

Anthony Trollope was writing shortly after the first Reform Act of 1832 extended suffrage and during the period when the second Act in 1867 further extended it to around 2 million men. Many of the current structures and practices of press power arose first during this period – with literacy, industrial printing and rail distribution, and the enfranchisement of this mass, though still restricted, electorate.

Novels are not records of real human behaviour, but with no hope of Levesonesque interrogation of long dead editors and politicians, they are the best we can do. Trollope's *'The Way We Live Now'*, *'The Warden'* and *'Phineas Finn'* plot with laser-like focus the human dramas that embodied the rise of newspaper power and this early accommodation between politicians and the press. They show how a new breed of politicians began to understand that they needed to make a deal with the newsmongers if their messages were to reach the electorate.

John Major and Trollope

Sir John Major loves Trollope. When he was castaway on a [Desert Island in 1992](#), the former Prime Minister chose to bring one book, Trollope's *The Small House at Allington*. A Trollopean discomfort with the press runs through Major's [evidence to the Leveson Inquiry](#). When a younger MP, Major perhaps identified with *Phineas Finn*. Born of a relatively humble family, Finn, like Major, made a rapid ascent of Westminster's greasy pole. Quite early in that climb, Trollope's ambitious MP character met Quintus Slide, the proprietor-editor of the *Daily Banner*, one of a variety of dailies that litter Trollope's fiction. For Major, [bad things happen](#) when such meetings between journalists and politicians take place. Major thought it was 'undignified' to seek common cause

with the Press. “Once you begin to meld (their) roles, neither the politicians nor the press are doing their job”. (Oral evidence).

Like Michael Gove, Phineas Finn used journalism to supplement his meagre and uncertain income from politics, and Quintus Slide became his editor. The periodic exchanges between Slide and Finn document the trading of policy for newspaper support (a trade that so concerned Major and Leveson and was so clearly both the making and the **downfall of the Blair administration**.) Quintus Slide, and *The Banner*, favoured introducing the Reform Act and secret ballots, and Finn was against. After receiving a guinea for writing his first article for *The Banner*, Finn is put under pressure to write in favour of Reform and the ballot. When Finn refuses, Slide announces that he intends himself to stand for election to “the ‘Ouse”. Finn’s disgust, and his rejection of the shoddy compromise between politics and press – is absolute. “Would it not be better that the quiet town... should remain as it was, (he thought) than that it should be polluted by the presence of Mr Quintus Slide”. (291).



PENGUIN CLASSICS

ANTHONY TROLLOPE

Phineas Finn

Trollope well knew that in the age of press power Slide’s ilk could no longer be excluded and excelled in showing why. The author was a proprietor-editor himself, co-founder of *Fortnightly Review* and later editor of *St Paul’s Magazine*. Describing Quintus Slide’s response when Finn refuses to support the ballot in exchange for the support of Slide’s ‘horgan’ *The Banner*, Trollope reveals the press hold over elected politicians.

The Banner, Trollope reveals the press hold over elected politicians.

Slide: “Very well! Now we understand each other, and that is all I desire. I think that I can show you what it is to come among gentlemen of the press, and then to throw them over. Good Morning”.

Phineas, thus, like John Major “resolved that a member of Parliament should be altogether independent of the press”, but two days later read on the pages of *The Banner*:

a startling article, a tremendous article, showing the pressing necessity of immediate reform and the proving the necessity by an illustration of the borough-mongering rottenness of the present system. When such a patron as Lord Brentford... could by his mere word put into the house such a stick as Phineas Finn, a man who had struggled to stand on his legs before the Speaker, but had wanted both the courage and the capacity, nothing further could surely be wanted to prove that the Reform Bill of 1832 required to be supplemented by some more energetic measure.

Trollope sums up.

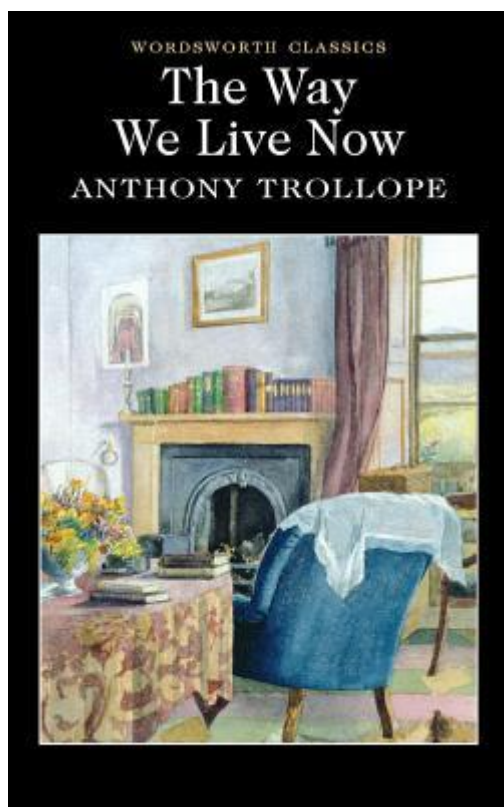
Mr Quintus Slide, when he was really anxious to use his thong earnestly, could generally raise a wale.

Rise of the Propreditors

The thong of campaigning reform newspapers of the nineteenth century was earnestly used, and mostly in the service of progressive democratic reform. In this sense the campaigning press was

the architect of its own power. This wider context is explored in the chapter devoted to Trollope in [Dallas Liddle's 2009 analysis](#) of journalists in nineteenth century novels. Liddle reminds us that journalists, particularly since the revival of Trollope since the 1960s, have been wary of the author. According to Liddle the “*Times* editor told the Trollope Society in 1992 that “Trollope could respect the Church, politics, the law, medicine. But he could never resist a dig at the press. When in doubt it seems, he could always sink his talons into a newspaper”. PCC chairman John Wakeham told the same organisation in 1997 that newspapers are usually “the bad guy” in Trollope’s fiction, that he was “cynical about the press”.

Liddle describes Tom Towers in Trollope’s *The Warden*, and chronicles how the editor characters tended in his later works to be divided souls, a theme he explored more in *Editor’s Tales*, a short story collection. As an editor, Trollope was himself wrestling with this central battle. Brandishing the quill of truth against unaccountable state power with one hand, but parrying accountability for his own occult power as a proprietor-editor with the other.



If asked to recommend two Trollope books I would suggest *The Way We Live Now* and *Phineas Finn*. Reading Trollope’s *The Way We Live Now* against the backdrop of the Leveson Inquiry certainly confirmed the lasting wisdom of the choice of title. The rise – and subsequent precipitous decline of the infamous Melmotte required collusion with numerous editors and proprietors, and an all too easy insinuation with the literary gatekeepers of London Society.

The central contradiction of Leveson was that a judge was asked to provide a template for press reform because collusion between politicians and the press had gone too far. He acknowledged that politicians in their responses may be constrained by the ‘megaphone’ of the press. Yet he had to pass the baton of reform back to those very politicians. In his written evidence to the Inquiry John Major noted that the risk inherent in too close a relationship between senior politicians and sections of the media is that the relationship can be perverted by self-interest. The press, in particular want “inside” stories and “scoops” and the politicians want favourable coverage. The trade-off is obvious and undesirable. “ (point 12) “Briefly, the way to maximise the benefits of the relationship between senior politicians and

the media, and to minimise the risks, seems to be for a relative distance to be maintained between the two. This removes temptation” (point 13) ([SJM 1-10;](#))

For those despairing for press reform, Trollope also reminds us that the republic of mediated public opinion is a great deal better than what went before. In the 19th century, the ‘organs’ of the campaigning Reform press were on the right side of history. The reforms that Quintus Slide proposed, but Phineas Finn was so against were to sweep away a corrupt, clientalist state in which real barons – rather than the press variety – delivered votes. He also reminds us that while a progressive future can be difficult to imagine, real change does happen. Just as it happened during the reforms of the nineteenth century, so the structural changes in news publishing – arguably every bit as revolutionary as those in Trollope’s period – will offer radically different possibilities not only for the role of the Fourth Estate but for the constitutional framework within which it is situated. If Gove’s “Twas Ever Thus” is not to become “and ever thus shall be”, civil society and the media need to work together towards a new settlement, through bodies such as [IMPRESS](#).

The intermediaries of the Future

Just as Trollope's age marked the dawn of mass manipulation of public opinion by a news medium that subsequently became consolidated and oligopolistic, with high barriers to entry and closed distribution channels, our age may in retrospect be revealed as one phase of the long sunset of newspaper 'propreditors' as the key gatekeepers of public opinion. The real problem for any budding contemporary Trollope however is that the new intermediaries of public opinion will not make such good characters for novels, because they are not human. Algorithms are capable of shaping public opinion in ways that are deeply subversive to trust in democracy as the [Facebook psychology experiment](#) and struggles over the [Right to be Forgotten](#) demonstrate. So for those wanting to grapple with that new reality I have one last book to recommend. *The Circle* by Dave Eggers. A quite brilliant pastiche of life in the Googleplex we increasingly inhabit. The Quintus Slides of this world are by no means extinct and party manifestos are unlikely to contain plans for their demise. The relationship between these established gatekeepers of meaning and the new, automated intermediaries needs to be much better understood, and structures of self and co-regulation need to be reformed to ensure that neither Slide, nor Eggers' 'Circle' are unchecked.

This article gives the views of the author and does not represent the position of the LSE Media Policy Project blog, nor of the London School of Economics.

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