Opposing the normalisation of lies

RECURRING themes at the Byline Festival of journalism in August were crime, corruption, misinformation, dark money and lies, lies, lies.

A session led by City, University of London’s Dr Paul Lashmar noted that Nick Davies and Carole Cadwalladr’s revelations about phone hacking and dark money around the EU referendum haven’t brought about the changes we would have hoped. But they’ve certainly inspired “a new generation of journalists” arriving in journalism schools. Such investigations have created “ripples… they inspire people”.

We heard from Alistair Morgan about the murder of his brother Daniel – a private investigator killed with an axe in the unlit car park of the Golden Lion pub in Sydenham 32 years ago. Alistair became a journalist in an attempt to untangle the “dirty mess” of his brother’s death.

Five convictions and collapsed prosecutions later, a new inquiry is in its seventh year. We’re no closer to the truth. Within months of Daniel’s death his company, Southern Investigations, became the go-to for Fleet Street phone hacking. Alistair concluded that just as organised crime has its contacts among corrupt police officers, so organised crime and corrupt police officers also cultivate contacts in the media.

How can we save the BBC, asked festival co-instigator Peter Jukes. The panel concluded that while most BBC journalists are excellent, some showing extraordinarily bravery, there are let down by “craven” management. The BBC charter’s requirement for “balance” doesn’t work anymore: “You can’t balance people who know stuff with people who don’t know stuff,” is as the case in “debates” on climate change.

One of many discussions on “the normalisation of lies” was led by Gavin Esler, author of Brexit Without the Bullshit. He compared the “facts” most people had picked up going into the 2016 EU referendum with the 35-page explanatory booklet delivered to every home in Northern Ireland in the run-up to the referendum there on the Good Friday Agreement.

Analysing Trump lies has become an industry in the US: the Washington Post clocked 10,600 demonstrable lies by the President Trump up to this June – 12 a day, including weekends. But there hasn’t quite been the same forensic investigation of serial lying in recent UK politics, with a startling lack of mainstream UK media interest in the Cambridge Analytica affair.

Compare today’s serial liar politicians getting away with it to the trouble President George Bush (Senior) got into after breaking his “Read my lips, no new taxes” promise back in 1988. President Clinton’s second term was mostly about the fallout from his claim “I did not have sex with that woman.”

But by 2016 former Speaker of the US House of Representatives Newt Gingrich, campaigning for Trump’s nomination, could say of the fall in crime nationally that “there may be some liberal statistics about how crime is going down, but that’s not how people feel.”

Security advice from Mark Spydology Blog included: don’t all switch your phones off at once just before you go into your secret meeting. To security forces or industrial spies monitoring you, it screams “secret meeting!”

Switch off your phones on the way to the meeting. Security folk going by train to Cheltenham for meetings at GCHQ apparently have written instructions to start switching off their phones at Paddington station.

All this and Pussy Riot too, who unfortunately took so long to set up for their gig that they pushed the programme past its strict 2am bedtime. Rapper Lowkey also performed, getting the audience to sing along: “Rap’s not dead! It’s at Byline!”

No-deal Brexit looms – again

HIGH DRAMA struck as we were editing this Freelance: the UK Supreme Court ruled that the government’s “prorogation” of Parliament was unlawful and void. Nothing is clear about what the revanent Parliament will do: but one effect may be that it can revisit the 99 pages of changes to immigration laws “laid before Parliament” just before it was unlawfully shut down.

These would allow the Home Office to revoke the Settled Status of an EU national after Brexit. Reasons for revoking could include knowingly providing false information.

UK immigration acts from the 1970s, still in force, require the government to lay any changes to immigration laws before Parliament. Theoretically, an MP or Lord could organise parliamentarians to “pray against” such secondary legislation, but they’ve rarely been able to organise this.

Now some newly-emboldened Opposition MPs, now effectively running Parliament, have called for a formal debate and a vote. And a House of Commons Select Committee may now hear evidence on problems around the EU Settlement Scheme. Earlier plans by Home Secretary Priti Patel to end freedom of movement for EU nationals immediately with effect from the latest planned date for Brexit – 31 October 2019 – were shelved, apparently after legal advice make it clear that to do so would be unlawful.

At the time of writing, a no-deal Brexit on 31 October is still a distinct possibility. If you’re travelling into or out of the UK around that time, whether you’re a UK national or an “other EU” national, you are advised to check you still have six months validity on your passport or ID card.

NUJ members who are UK nationals living in the EU or EU nationals living in the UK should contact their embassies for advice on what to do in the event of a Brexit. The most recent advice to the NUJ is at www.londonfreelance.org/fl/1903brexit.html

A no-deal Brexit would mean EU nationals have until 31 December 2020 to apply for EU Settled Status. In the event of a deal, the deadline will likely be 31 June 2021.

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New emergency numbers

NUJ members needing emergency legal help – for example if you’ve been arrested or face an imminent police interview – should call 0114 241 9700 if the legal matter is in England or Wales. If the legal matter is in Scotland, call 0800 801 299 and in the Republic of Ireland 01817 0340. For less dramatic advice, freelance NUJ members should contact FreelanceOffice@nuj.org.uk