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Censorship and blind spots: the BBC's silences

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# The BBC and the miners' strike of 1984/85: coverage of the "Battle of Orgreave"

Jeremy Tranmer

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## Introduction

- 1 The Thatcher years were a particularly difficult period for the BBC as it found itself frequently under attack. The Prime Minister's hostility to the corporation was well known. In her opinion, it had a privileged status in the British audiovisual landscape as a result of the licence fee that it charged and it produced programmes that were little different to those of its commercial rival ITV. Margaret Thatcher was also critical of the BBC's coverage of Northern Ireland and the Falklands War. One of the most noteworthy events of the period was the miners' strike of 1984/85. Throughout the country many miners ceased work and embarked on a strike that was to last almost a year. Violent clashes between the police and striking miners culminated in the "Battle of Orgreave". Miners attempted to prevent lorries from going into and out of the Orgreave coking plant in South Yorkshire, and the fierce fighting which broke out made the news headlines. The role of the police and the media, particularly the BBC, was hugely controversial at the time and has remained so ever since.
- 2 Obviously, the aim of this article is not to express a judgement about the rights and wrongs of policing or of pickets' actions, but to examine what this episode reveals about the BBC. This paper will look at the BBC's coverage of the day's events, which differed sharply from that of ITV in how it presented the violence and apportioned the blame for it. It will also mention the debates inside and outside the BBC that its coverage gave rise to and its reluctant admission several years later that mistakes had been made. Finally, it will look at what this episode reveals about the impartiality of the BBC, comparing it to the corporation's coverage of previous strikes and situating it in the ideological context of the 1980s. It will suggest that Herman and Chomsky's

propaganda model can contribute to understanding the BBC's news coverage at this time.

## 1. Orgreave and the BBC: the making of a controversy

- 3 It is important to begin with some background information about the conflict before moving on to the role of the BBC. From the Industrial Revolution onwards, coal mining was a vital part of the British economy. This was recognised officially when the industry was nationalised after World War Two. In the post-war years, mining remained an important part of the British economy as coal was used to produce electricity. However, there was a steady reduction in the number of miners due to technological advances which led to increased productivity. Alternative sources of energy, such as gas and nuclear energy, also appeared. Mining was a physically unpleasant and dangerous job, and miners grew increasingly militant in their demands for a decent wage from the late 1960s onwards. National strikes over wages took place in 1972 and 1974. The 1974 strike was particularly significant as it led to power cuts and the declaration of a state of emergency, and it contributed to the defeat of the Conservative government of Edward Heath.
- 4 Once she was elected in 1979, Margaret Thatcher made it clear that she wanted to make the mining industry more efficient and make the British economy less dependent on coal. The Conservatives had been hostile to the miners since 1974, and it was widely rumoured that they wanted revenge and were preparing for another conflict, especially after the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) swung to the left with the election of Arthur Scargill as leader in 1981. In March 1984, the National Coal Board (NCB), which had run the mining industry since its nationalisation, announced plans to close 20 mines with the loss of 20,000 jobs.<sup>1</sup> For the NCB, these pits were uneconomic and needed closing irrespective of the social consequences in mining areas. The NUM believed that this was merely the tip of the iceberg and that the NCB had a secret plan to close many more mines and to destroy thousands more jobs. The vast majority of miners went on strike, but in controversial circumstances as no national ballot on strike action was held. A minority of miners continued to work, especially in Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire. Mass picketing was at the heart of the NUM's strategy, as striking miners attempted to persuade working miners to join the strike and tried to paralyse strategic targets.
- 5 The strike made the headlines of the press for months and dominated television news almost every day. The broadcast media came under criticism from both sides, each believing it to be sympathetic to the other. The BBC, because of its status as a public sector broadcaster and of the large audiences of its news programmes, was under close scrutiny. This was particularly the case following the 'Battle of Orgreave'. On June 18th 1984, large numbers of striking miners gathered at the Orgreave coking plant in South Yorkshire, hoping to block the entrance, preventing lorries from entering and leaving. There was also a large police presence. Violent clashes broke out between the pickets and the police, resulting in 93 arrests, while 51 pickets and 72 policemen were injured.
- 6 The clashes were the first items of the BBC early evening news at 5.40 pm and of the ITV news at 5.45 pm. The BBC news was presented by Moira Stewart. Behind her was a still photograph of a miner aiming a flying kick at a policeman. This set the tone of the report that followed.<sup>2</sup> The chronology of events presented in the report is significant:

objects were thrown by miners at the police, miners attacked the police, then the police charged on horseback, and arrests were made. There are images of fighting, including a miner launching a flying kick at a policeman. Most of the images were filmed from behind the police lines. The commentary is interesting too. The police tried to "shepherd" the miners away, the miners "surged forwards", "the picketing had turned to rioting", "eventually senior officers ordered in the mounted police", "the police became involved in some of the most vicious hand to hand fighting of the entire miners' dispute", "the attacks on individual policemen were horrific", and the confrontation was due to a "conscious decision [by the miners] to use any method to stop the coke lorries". Arthur Scargill "claimed" he had been knocked down by police, but the Assistant Chief Commissioner was quoted directly giving a different version.<sup>3</sup> The commentary reinforces the impression given by the images: the police were attacked and when they had had enough, they responded in a controlled manner.

- 7 The report on the ITV news programme was very different. The report is not available online as of the date of writing, but it has been described in detail in academic articles.<sup>4</sup> The timeline of events is less clear than in the BBC report. The commentary and the accompanying images make it clear that some of the worst acts of violence were committed by the police who made a deliberate decision to "turn nasty". The miner's flying kick is preceded by images of a policeman repeatedly hitting a prostrate miner on the head with a truncheon. It becomes apparent that, at that particular moment, miners were in fact trying to defend a colleague who was being beaten up. In the Channel 4 7 o'clock news, the presenter even asked the Chief Constable of South Yorkshire police whether policemen would face disciplinary measures for their violent acts.<sup>5</sup>
- 8 The approach adopted in the BBC 9 o'clock news was different to that of the earlier news.<sup>6</sup> The flying kick was no longer the backdrop in the studio, for example. The images remained, but the commentary changed. The sending in of riot police had been "the trigger" for the violence; they "handed out as much physical punishment as they received"; and "the riots squads gave no quarter using their batons liberally". The miners were no longer solely responsible for the violence that had taken place.
- 9 In the following days, however, the BBC came under serious criticism from the miners and their supporters, including people who had been at Orgreave and had seen first-hand what had happened. In particular, it was accused of deliberately changing the sequence of events in the early evening news in order to give the impression that the miners had started the violence, of cutting precise examples of police violence and of generally underplaying police violence while concentrating on violence by the miners. Near the end of the strike, during a debate in the House of Commons, the Labour MP Tony Benn repeated the allegation that the BBC had deliberately reversed the sequence of events at Orgreave to mislead the British public.<sup>7</sup> And for a few years that was the end of the matter. However, in 1991 the monthly journal of the NUM, *the Miner*, published an article about the BBC and Orgreave.<sup>8</sup> A local group called the Concerned Citizens of Cambridge had heard Tony Benn repeat his allegations and had contacted the BBC. A representative of the BBC director general Michael Checkland replied admitting that a mistake had been made. In their haste to put the news together, editors had inadvertently reversed the order of what happened. The years passed, but the issue of the BBC reporting at Orgreave never quite went away.<sup>9</sup> The Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom repeated the allegations in a book about the strike

published in 2009.<sup>10</sup> In a review of the book, the former industrial editor of the *Daily Mirror*, Geoffrey Goodman, went even further and stated that, according to his contacts in the BBC, the corporation had received instructions from the government to concentrate on miners' violence in news reports.<sup>11</sup> However, he presented no concrete evidence to back up his claims.

- 10 In 2012, the Yorkshire and Lincolnshire variation of the BBC TV series *Inside Out* produced a programme about Orgreave, which led to renewed interest in this episode of the strike and the creation of the Orgreave Truth and Justice Campaign.<sup>12</sup> The Campaign has argued in favour of an official report into the events of Orgreave and has also demanded an apology from the BBC for its reporting.<sup>13</sup> The BBC replied in 2014 that: "Thirty years on, it is difficult to reach definitive conclusions, but our investigations have uncovered no evidence of any deliberate attempt to mislead viewers in the coverage of the Battle of Orgreave."<sup>14</sup> It added that some of the violence had not been recorded because of "camera error". The Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom brought out a book to coincide with the 30th anniversary of the strike which contained new material.<sup>15</sup> Under the Freedom of Information Act, the journalist Tony Harcup had gained access to internal BBC documents. One of these was the minutes of a meeting of the BBC's News and Current Affairs group held several days after the events of Orgreave. News editor Peter Boon admitted that there was a "marginal imbalance" in the early evening news coverage of the violence, while assistant director general Alan Protheroe stated that "the BBC's early evening coverage might not have been wholly impartial".<sup>16</sup> In the following debate, it was suggested that the BBC could not remain neutral between "lawbreakers and the police".
- 11 Although more is known now about the BBC's reporting of Orgreave than in 1984, it has remained controversial. At the current time, it is impossible to determine with any degree of certainty whether the BBC was selective about the images it decided to show and whether the images were broadcast in the wrong order deliberately in order to try to discredit the miners. However, this article shall suggest that this episode reveals a great deal about the BBC and its commitment to impartiality.

## 2. Orgreave, the BBC and impartiality

- 12 Two important questions are raised by the BBC's early evening news report. Why did it not occur to anyone that the images might have been reversed? And why was it only noticed when other channels presented the events differently? To try to answer these questions, it is necessary to take a brief look at the history of the BBC regarding the reporting of strikes in general and its reporting of the miners' strike of 1984-85 before Orgreave, before moving on to the ideological context of the 1980s.
- 13 Obviously, it is impossible to examine how the BBC reported every single strike on the radio and then later on the radio and television. The General Strike of 1926 is arguably the most appropriate point of comparison. Although it took place almost 60 years before the miners' strike, it was the last time that so many people (both miners and their supporters) had been mobilised in a strike and, arguably, the last time that the political stakes of an industrial dispute had been so high.<sup>17</sup> It is not useful to go into the General Strike in any great detail as most accounts of it discuss the role of the BBC.<sup>18</sup> During the General Strike the BBC remained formally independent, but the threat of being taken over by the government was enough to encourage it to follow Baldwin's

Conservative government's line.<sup>19</sup> Some ministers such as Winston Churchill wanted the BBC to be as supportive as the government-produced *British Gazette* newspaper. Director-General John Reith believed that the BBC had to be on the side of the government and to support law and order. It has been noted in the many accounts of its history that the BBC's editorial line was far from impartial during the strike, that the government itself was its main source of information about the strike and that opposition spokespeople were excluded from the airwaves.<sup>20</sup> The BBC saw itself as defending the national interest, but the latter had been defined by Baldwin's government. In *The BBC. The Myth of a Public Service*, Tom Mills has argued that the General Strike was a defining experience for the BBC and has shaped much of its coverage of industrial disputes ever since.<sup>21</sup> It could also be added that a Conservative government, backed by much of the press, pressurising the BBC over a strike has a certain relevance for the events which took place in 1984/85.

- 14 How did the BBC report the miners' strike of 1984/85? This question may seem rather simplistic as the BBC is not a monolithic organisation. It can easily be forgotten that it produced local radio and television programmes, in which voices that were more sympathetic to the miners were sometimes able to express themselves. For practical reasons, this article will be limited to national radio and television. Although it has been noted that the radio coverage was less hostile to the miners than television, the Labour Correspondent for BBC radio at the time, Nicholas Jones, has since distanced himself from some of his own reporting, admitting that it had been too heavily influenced by the government's perspectives and agenda concerning the coal industry and the strike itself.<sup>22</sup> For example, Jones has conceded that he had accepted uncritically the need to close what the government referred to as "uneconomic pits" and had participated inadvertently in the government's campaign to publicise the return to work by some miners. Jones also mentions an occasion when he was criticised by his hierarchical superiors for a report in which he questioned some of the figures given by the government concerning the number of working miners. Regarding television news, even before Orgreave, the BBC focused on picket line violence and blamed the miners for it.<sup>23</sup> Its reporting of picket lines was literally presented from the police's angle, as journalists were behind police lines, which is where most images were filmed from. Consequently, viewers could not help but share the point of view of the police and sympathise with it. The BBC, along with the majority of the media, constantly used the metaphor of war in images and in language to refer to the strike, presenting the miners as the enemy. This delegitimised the miners, while suggesting that no compromise was possible between the two sides and that the miners had to be defeated.<sup>24</sup>
- 15 Whether the government exerted direct pressure on the BBC is a question that simply cannot be answered. Despite Geoffrey Goodman's accusations, there is no actual evidence of this. Nothing has been found in government papers that were released into the public domain 30 years later or in the BBC's files. However, it must be borne in mind that the BBC had been under constant pressure from the Conservatives since the election of Margaret Thatcher.<sup>25</sup> In fact, it could be added that it had been under near constant pressure from the Conservatives since the 1920s, when accusations of left-wing bias began.<sup>26</sup> However, it does seem clear that the pressure intensified in the early 1980s, creating a climate in which the BBC had to be careful about how it reported the strike. It could even be argued that as a result of this, direct government intervention was not necessary. The press also had a role in this situation. By the 1980s, it was



overwhelmingly favourable to Margaret Thatcher's Conservatives, far more so than in the past. During the strike, papers such as the *Daily Mail*, the *Sun*, the *Daily Telegraph* and the *Times* were vehemently hostile to the miners.<sup>27</sup> The right-wing press contributed to creating a climate in which the government's vision of the strike became the common sense of the time. In other words, it was not just an industrial dispute, it was about maintaining law and order and it was the miners who were responsible for violence. Interestingly, a PhD was written a couple of years after the end of the strike which was based on a large number of interviews with members of the public.<sup>28</sup> It demonstrated that as a result of reporting a significant section of the British population believed that picket line violence was an everyday occurrence, which statistically speaking, was not the case. BBC journalists and employees did not live in a vacuum and were exposed to other influences, especially the press. The dominant narrative of the strike developed by the government and expressed by much of the press was thus adopted and applied regarding Orgreave.

- 16 The propaganda model developed by Herman and Chomsky can also help clarify the situation of the BBC during the miners' strike. The model was developed in the late 1980s to analyse the reporting of the corporate media mainly in the United States.<sup>29</sup> Herman and Chomsky identify five "filters" which have an impact on how news is reported: the concentrated ownership and profit orientation of the mass media, advertising as the main source of income, the reliance of information provided by a limited number of sources including the government, negative responses ("flak") as a means of exerting pressure, and anti-communism as a mechanism of control.<sup>30</sup>
- 17 Despite the specificities of the BBC, a modified version of Herman and Chomsky's model can be applied to it. The first two filters are not relevant to the BBC since it is not a private company and does not carry advertising. Nevertheless, it occupies a peculiar position as a result of its status. Although it is technically speaking independent, members of its governing body (the Board of Directors, as it was known in the 1980s) are named by the government. As a result of its ability to change the composition of the Board of Directors, the government is able to exert influence over the corporation. The Charter of the BBC has to be renewed every ten years and needs to be approved by the government. Moreover, the licence fee, which is used to finance the BBC, is set by the government. Because of these three factors, the BBC is not entirely independent and it has to take into account its dependence on the government.
- 18 This may have an impact on the third filter. According to Herman and Chomsky,  
"The mass media are drawn into a symbiotic relationship with powerful sources of information by economic necessity and reciprocity of interest. The media need a steady, reliable flow of the raw material of news. They have daily news demands and imperative news schedules that they must meet."<sup>31</sup>
- 19 It is obvious that the BBC needs daily information from the government as well as daily access to ministers. It could be argued that the government also needs the BBC in order to inform the public of its policies and to try to maintain or to gain support for them. However, the government is clearly in position of strength due to the constitutional arrangements governing the BBC. Herman and Chomsky also note that, "powerful sources regularly take advantage of media routines and dependency to 'manage' the media, to manipulate them into following a special agenda and framework" by giving them particular stories or providing information with a particular slant on it.<sup>32</sup> The government and the National Coal Board provided the BBC with information during the strike. This could help to explain why, as mentioned above, the BBC devoted so much



time to presenting violence as a major aspect of the strike and to blaming the miners for it.

- 20 Herman and Chomsky's fourth filter consists of negative reactions to a programme or a news report, which could go as far as the removal of advertising leading to a significant loss of revenue. In the years between the first time Margaret Thatcher was elected in 1979 and the miners' strike, the BBC was frequently attacked by the government, the Conservative MPs, the Conservative Party and the right-wing press. This happened, for example, during the Falklands War when the BBC was criticised for not clearly taking the British government's side and for not being sufficiently patriotic. Although the BBC could not be affected by the removal of advertising, it could be subjected to hostile reactions questioning the legitimacy of its status. The BBC was thus aware that it could easily be at the heart of a campaign of vilification which could damage its position in the eyes of the public and the government.
- 21 Herman and Chomsky's final filter is anti-communism. Although fear and hatred of Communism never reached the same levels in the United Kingdom as in the United States, parties, groups and individuals who deviated too sharply from the dominant norms of British politics were portrayed in the media as extremists who posed a threat to the very fabric of the country.<sup>33</sup> The fact that Arthur Scargill was an avowed Marxist and a former member of the Communist Party and that Mick MacGahey, the leader of the Scottish miners, was still a Communist, had an impact on how they were presented in the media. And this in turn affected how striking miners were portrayed. Rather than showing them as desperately defending their livelihoods and their communities, the media claimed that they were hell-bent on violence destruction. Seen from this perspective, the BBC's presentation of Orgreave is quite logical: miners were extremists who were ready to attack the police to further their cause. The combination of Herman and Chomsky's five filters thus shows how consent for the government's positions was manufactured.

## Conclusion

- 22 The BBC's coverage of the Battle of Orgreave reveals a great deal about the corporation. In trying to understand the BBC, it is important to go beyond its official declarations of independence and impartiality as the reality of its positioning and of its reporting was more complex. Although the BBC played a central role in the landscape of the British media, it could be influenced by other media, such as the right-wing press and the narratives it developed. It has been observed that, over the years, the BBC's entertainment output has been shaped by the competition provided by ITV. The case of Orgreave suggests that the BBC's actual reporting can also on occasions be influenced by that of its rival. It would appear that the differences between the 5.40 news and the 9 o'clock news were at least partially a reaction to the version of events presented in the ITV news. The episode of Orgreave also shows that the BBC was not only criticised by Margaret Thatcher and the right in the 1980s, but also on occasions by sections of the left, which is sometimes forgotten. Finally, the BBC is not an unchanging monolith as, paradoxically, a regional BBC programme was responsible for rekindling interest in Orgreave and sparking off fresh demands for a public enquiry.

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## NOTES

1. For a general history of the strike, see for example Goodman, Geoffrey. *The Miners' Strike*, London, Pluto, 1985.
2. The report can be seen here: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d2jH53e6\\_jQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d2jH53e6_jQ) (accessed 1 December 2020).
3. *Ibid.*
4. For instance, Correia, Alice. "Interpreting Jeremy Deller's *The Battle of Orgreave*", in Ten Brink, Joram and Oppenheimer, Joshua (eds), *Killer Images. Documentary Film, Memory and the Performance of Violence*, London, Wallflower Press, 2012, p. 192-193; Cumberbatch, Guy, Morrison, David, Brown, John and McGregor, Robin, *Television and the Miners' Strike*, London, Broadcasting Research Unit, 1986, p. 50; and Masterman, Len. "The Battle of Orgreave", in Masterman, Len (ed.), *Television Mythologies. Stars, Show and Signs*, London, Routledge, 1992 (1984), p. 102-103.
5. Masterman, Len (ed.), *Television Mythologies. Stars, Show and Signs*, op. cit., p., 106.
6. *Ibidem*
7. Hansard, House of Commons Debates, 4 February 1985, column 649. In the following years, Benn continued to accuse the BBC of having mislead its viewers. See for example Mike Figgis's 2001 documentary about the reenactment of the Battle of Orgreave, during which Benn is interviewed and Checkland's response is given (13:41 – 14:58): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3ncrWxnLjg> (accessed 29 April 2021).
8. Harcup, p. 100-101.
9. This was partly because the issue of the policing of Orgreave became linked to that of the 1989 Hillsborough disaster, when 96 Liverpool supporters died during a football match in Sheffield as the South Yorkshire police force was directly involved in both cases. Investigations revealed that police chiefs had deliberately blamed supporters for the deaths and pressured ordinary members of the police into repeating these claims. These revelations fuelled demands for an official inquiry into the events of Orgreave.
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17. The General Strike began on May 4<sup>th</sup> 1926. It was organised by the leadership of the Trades Union Congress (TUC) in order to force the government to intervene in a conflict over pay and conditions in the privately-owned coal industry. The General Strike was called off by the TUC after nine days. The miners returned to work over the following months.
18. See for example, Loch Mowat, Charles. *Britain Between the Wars, 1918-1940*, London, Methuen, 1955, p. 320.

19. Dickason, Renée. "Genèse de la BBC ou les balbutiements de sa Majesté des ondes", *Revue Française de Civilisation Britannique*, XXVI-1, 2021, <https://journals.openedition.org/rfcb/7433> (accessed 3 May 2021).
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27. See for example, Hollingsworth, Mark. *The Press and Political Dissent. A Question of Censorship*, London, Pluto Press, 1986, p. 242-285.
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29. Herman, Edward S. and Chomsky, Noam. *Manufacturing Consent. The Political Economy of the Mass Media*, London, Vintage, 1994 (1988), p. 1-35.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 2.
31. *Ibid.*, p. 8.
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33. In the 1980s, other figures of the left were frequently attacked in the press, such as MP Tony Benn, leader of the Greater London Council Ken Livingstone and leading figure of Liverpool City Council Derek Hatton.

## ABSTRACTS

One of the most controversial events of the Thatcher years was the miners' strike of 1984/85. Throughout the country miners ceased work and embarked on a strike that was to last over a year. Violent clashes between the police and striking miners dominated media coverage of the strike and culminated in the 'Battle of Orgreave'. On June 18th 1984, miners attempted to prevent lorries from going into and out of the Orgreave coking plant, and the fierce fighting that broke out made the news headlines. This article examines the BBC's coverage of the day's events, which differed sharply from that of ITV in how it presented the violence and apportioned blame for it, giving rise to accusations of political bias against the miners. Using Herman and Chomsky's propaganda model, it will attempt to explain the reactions of the BBC to the events of Orgreave.

## INDEX

**Geographical index:** Grande-Bretagne

**Chronological index:** 1984-1985

**Mots-clés:** BBC, miners' strike, media, censorship, Orgreave

**Subjects:** médias, syndicalisme

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