

I have now been a journalist for 40 years. The forces ranged against my profession have never been so powerful

by George Monbiot, *The Guardian*, September 20th, 2025

The BBC I joined on my first day of professional journalism – 40 years ago this week – is unrecognisable today. While, for most of its history, the corporation had largely defended the status quo, under the director general at the time, Alasdair Milne, its journalists were sometimes allowed to stick it to power. This, I believe, is what journalism exists to do – and seldom does.

We broke some big stories. But on 29 January 1987, disaster struck. The BBC's investigations had infuriated the Thatcher government. The BBC board forced the resignation of Alasdair Milne. The following day, when my boss came into the office, he told me: "That's it. No more investigative journalism." It wasn't just my career that hit the buffers: it was my worldview. I had naively believed that humanity's problem was an information deficit. Now, I began to see, while the pen might be mightier than the sword, the wallet is mightier than the pen.

I was recruited at the tail end of the "great compression": a period of radically lower inequality. The two world wars had destroyed much of the political power of capital, enabling high taxation of the very rich, the creation of a welfare state and a widening spectrum of politics and opinion. Since then, as the money and power of the very rich have multiplied once more, the governments they support have sought to crush dissent.

When Milne was sacked I took a six-month job producing current affairs at the BBC World Service. It was an excellent schooling in global politics, but I realised I could never thrive in a newsroom. On a slow news day, we were debating the lead for our programme among several dull options. Ten minutes before transmission, the editor strode into the studio, clapped his hands and announced: "Great – 110 dead in Sri Lanka!"

I entertained another crazily naive belief: that I should work only for the rightwing press, reaching people who would otherwise never see such stories. When I finally managed to have an article on the impacts of car pollution published in the Daily Mail, an editor asked me: "So what's the solution? More research?" No, I answered, "stronger regulation". Reading the published article, I discovered that the solution was "more research".

I finally saw the bleeding obvious: you cannot speak truth to power if power controls your words. I was lucky to be taken on by the Guardian. It remains among the very few mainstream outlets, anywhere, in which you can freely criticise the real elite.

Power is the rock on which truth founders. It will always find willing enforcers: no one ever lost money by telling billionaires what they want to hear. The mainstream media, with a few exceptions, is a single-issue lobby group, whose purpose is to assert the rights of capital.

But perhaps the ground is shifting. Citizen journalism is flowering, through the Bylines network, openDemocracy and others, and in particular at the local level. Some local newspapers emerge as innovative new outlets, such as the Bristol Cable, Glasgow's Bell, and countless others across the country. Something is stirring; something that could become very big – a citizens' revolt against the propaganda of power. We fight for the day on which the pen beats the wallet.