

## Culture Wars in the Media

Mr Dean, ladies and gentlemen. Thank you for your kind introduction and your invitation to join such an august line of guest speakers.

What a pleasure it is to be here this evening, though it is a pleasure tinged with trepidation.

I worry that those who work in the media have quite enough opportunity to be heard without being granted this storied platform further to inflict their views on others.

I'm conscious – as we meet here this evening in a forum of ethical discussion - that journalists tend to rush for the story rather than pause too long to consider its ramifications.

And, amid this accelerated news cycle, I am slightly worried that we may be losing another prime minister as we sit here.

But as I stared at the big quote in a Guardian article, I was reminded that there is a conversation that needs to be addressed.

"I've given up watching the news," said a 60-something man in the Guardian piece. "It's all lies."

Oh, come on. Given up? Really? Stopped when we have moved from all that theoretical stuff to pure theatrical drama? Stopped in the middle of the fallout from the Supreme Court decision. Stopped with a beleaguered prime minister on both the wrong side of the Atlantic and the wrong side of the law?

We've always had room for different interpretations of the news. A divergence of political view is manifest in the reaction to almost every news story. Observers have always interpreted things in accordance with their underlying philosophy. Once we had left and right. Today we have leave and remain.

The reaction to yesterday's extraordinary events at the Supreme Court encapsulated the issue.

To one side the court was properly responding to outrageous hubris, to an arrogant insult to an important debate, to an attempt to silence the Commons, an insult to ride roughshod over the wishes who wanted to remain. The prime minister had shown contempt for democracy.

Hail to Lady Hale.

To the other the resort to unelected lawyers – who ARE these 11 judges? - was further evidence of Establishment conspiracy, of a denial of the will of the people, frustration of an elected government, a blatant move to frustrate the result of the Referendum. The judges had shown contempt for democracy.

Thought for the Day's own Giles Fraser tweeted: "The establishment will do everything in its power to frustrate the will of the people. These are dark days indeed."

Those reactions, the manner in which two warring tribes interpreted a court judgement in different ways to support their view of the world, demonstrated a polarization of opinion that has gone far beyond a traditional political divide.

We are engaged in a war of rival cultures in which each side no longer merely takes a different view, but also refuses to believe a word coming from the other.

It's not that old left right divide. It's Brexit. And somehow it has sucked humanity, goodwill and kindness from exchanges.

That is the culture war I would like to discuss this evening...and how it has affected our media.

...in particular, whether the media have *reported* this war, *encouraged* this war or actually *started* this war.

...whether the media have forfeited any role as guardians of democratic society...

...and - on a day to day practical level - how those of us who work in media respond to audiences that no longer trust a word we say.

There is a question attributed to the late Louis Heren, a foreign correspondent for The Times, talking about a journalist's proper reaction on being told something by a politician: "Why is this lying bastard lying to me?" Now the question is being turned round: "Why are the lying media lying to us?"

Let us pause to define culture war. The American sociologist James Hunter used the phrase when wrote in 1991 about the issues that divided America into two warring groups. They were split not by older attitudes such as social class but – most obviously - between liberal and traditionalist points of view. In the United States we see that war continue between the supporters and the opponents of the polarizing President Trump.

Here we have Brexit, encouraging a new level of anger that is directed not merely at politicians, but also at the media.

At best, we the media have failed to unmask the villains of the piece – naturally the two sides of the debate identify different villains – at worst we are *in collusion* with the villains.

At this point, because the media world is expanding so rapidly, I guess we should also define what we mean by media. Print, both on paper and online. Broadcast, on screen, on radio and online. And, increasingly, the medium that threatens to run away with everything: social media, in particular Facebook and Twitter.

I was a journalist for 30 years in newspapers before joining the BBC.

The thing about newspapers is that – unless you do something so wicked that it breaks the law - what you publish is nobody's business but yours and your readers.

The thing about working for the BBC is that what you broadcast is EVERYBODY'S business.

Newspapers have agendas. Newspapers are biased. Left, right, upmarket, down-market. Readers are self-selecting. They come to a title knowing what to expect and wanting it.

The BBC is not biased.

What I reckon it DOES have is a slightly wistful impulse towards social cohesion. It desperately wants to do the right thing. It likes community rather than sowing division. This can mean a wish to police language.

Mischief makes papers happy. Mischief makes the BBC anxious.

And what goes for the BBC pretty much goes for the other broadcasters. They attract less attention – and much less opprobrium – because we don't have to buy a licence to watch. One or two of those broadcasters – notably the new radio talk shows – do promise greater misbehavior, but it comes in patches. They are regulated. And they are expected, over each day of broadcasting, to present with balance.

Then clever tech people threw some big rocks in the pond. The ripples are still spreading out. The internet world has rewritten the economics of the entire news industry. Newspapers were already having a tough time

because old readers were dying and young readers didn't seem to exist. Then they began losing ad revenue to the internet giants. Now many are nearly broke.

The digital world promised to usher in a new world of citizen journalism, where stories could be told free of the influence of governments, businesses, proprietors and pressure groups. There has indeed been some pure reporting...

...along with much writing that appears to offer an original piece of news but then refers for its source to a piece in longer established media...

...and a huge amount of rumour, invention, mischief and bile.

Here's a good example of the Twitter debate, from a former listener to the Today programme. He is discussing the departure of the long-standing broadcaster John Humphrys, who tended to raise hackles among remainers. I suspect this Twitter commentator is from the left:

"So long as he isn't replaced 'like for like', I might, albeit an infinitesimally tiny might, consider tuning in again. But wait, silly me, that vile Tory plant Sarah Sands will still be editing (controlling the whole shaboodle) so that will still be a big NO to tuning in again."

Now when you work for a newspaper you can tell from the postbag whether you are giving the readers what they want. You can have a look too at the comments that appear under the pieces online.

When you work in broadcasting you have the great pleasure of feedback IN REAL TIME.

EVEN AS YOU ARE PUTTING OUT THE PROGRAMME.

Some of the criticism is political convention. The Today programme plays for three hours every weekday morning and for a couple of hours on a Saturday. If I did not have a constant stream of texts from 10 Downing Street and from the Labour press office I would think something was wrong. Their comments usually end in exclamation marks.

"Outrageous!" "A travesty!" "This is a joke!" "We demand an on air correction!"

And sometimes in question marks.

"Why don't you say that the Gov is increasing police numbers?"

"No mention of our work for entrepreneurs?"

"You need to mention the support we are giving fisherman...young people...OLD people."

Or my personal favourite. "This is NOT a story."

Which almost always means it is a really good story.

The last time I had the "this is NOT a story" text it was over the rights of EU nationals. We had foreign nationals coming on the programme to say they had been turned down for residents' status. The government back-pedalled once it realized the foreign nationals were telling a compelling story.

Those are the quasi-official moans, coming from party campaign officers. They are usually escalated to letters of complaint to the BBC director general and the complaints department. This being the BBC, the complaints department is bound to open an investigation.

And then there are the trolls. The trolls are different. The trolls go public on Twitter.

Some of it is what lawyers call "vulgar abuse".

Some is presented with the patina of journalistic investigation.

I have, for instance, an accountant following me. Or at least she suggests on her Twitter profile that she is an accountant. Her premise is that I am a spider sitting at the centre of a conspiracy into which I have dragged the Today programme.

I am one step away from being a Russian bot.

Her mix of investigative journalism overlaid with assumption is compelling. To demonstrate my connection with bad men, there is a photograph of me at a lunch with Nigel Farage and Rupert Murdoch. It was at the summer party of my former employer, the newspaper proprietor Evgeny Lebedev. Evgeny liked to mix up his guests. The neighbor on my right was an actor of determinedly left-wing views. I spent most of the event talking to the mayor of London, Sadiq Khan. But a picture with Sadiq Khan does not make a story.

The better story is one of undue influence. Here is Lord Adonis, a former Labour transport secretary, on Twitter: "I no longer support the continuation of the BBC in its current form. BBC News is so debased and biased; it should be replaced by a new independent news service under new management and governance. One option would be simply to ask Channel 4 News to take it over."

In case I have implied that this is all gloom and depression, that life in media is unremitting misery, there are occasional glimpses of a kinder world. A letter arrives from Sir Richard Storey, of Setlington Grange, north Yorkshire.

"Dear Sarah Sands,

Please could you take seriously the thoughts I express below.

I am rather deaf but wear two first class hearing aids. For quite a while I have found much of the Today programme incomprehensible, as, indeed, the London theatre.

You had on your programme for a few minutes a past Finnish Prime Minister, now chairman of some bank. Finns learn English very well, because otherwise they can't talk anything else in the world.

Many of your guests are clueless about how to speak and are also incomprehensible which is a shame **BECAUSE I AM PREPARED TO DISCOUNT THE NOTORIOUS BBC POLITICAL BIAS AND LISTEN TO THE TODAY PROGRAMME."**

Having been accused of being a Tory, Brexit stooge, it is a relief to be pushed into the opposite camp. Sir Richard, it is clear, believes we are biased the other way. To my joy, two years after the first, a second letter arrives:

"Dear Sarah,

I don't listen to the Today programme regularly or thoroughly as I find it prejudiced/partial in its selection of agenda – when do we hear anybody proclaiming the virtues of No Deal by Boris Johnson – we don't.

The principal reason, of course, is that I can't hear, being a little deaf, much of what is trying to be said.

Some years ago, I told you how eloquent and comprehensible was an earlier Finnish Prime Minister, and now I write to tell you that another person I have been able to hear and understand was Lord Saville talking about Northern Ireland and prosecuting troops, so you are keeping up the record of my being able to hear one

person every few years – what would be a particular treat would be to hear Lord Saville debating with the Finnish Prime Minister.

With good wishes,

Richard Storey

Sir Richard has a sense of humour. It is in short supply.

Do the media set out to lie?

We cannot enter tonight the vexed question of "what is truth". You do not have the time and I have not read enough philosophy.

From the first day on the job, the journalist is encouraged to set out the "facts" – and I am putting big inverted commas round that word. There is a simple rule for the intro – who, what, why, where and when. Sarah Sands, speech, invited, Windsor, tonight. Fact, fact, fact, fact, fact.

But then there are more complicated stories, with disputed facts. There are proprietors, with political interests. There are nuances. There are journalistic egos. There are institutional biases. And there are decisions to be made fast, spaces to fill, appearances booked because speakers are available. Cases that are not made because people refuse to come on to make them.

From the outside, things can look like a conspiracy. From the inside, they look like trying to put order into chaos.

Since joining the BBC I have discarded any political opinions. It is like taking off your shoes before entering the temple. I am so schooled in impartiality I am wearing a blue red and green dress this evening. There is much discussion about perceived bias about the BBC, but I can say that the ritual cleansing never ends.

The media are not alone in the dock. There has been a breakdown of trust between the public and those in position of power. Conventions of truthfulness have gone.

You can decide if our prime minister is part of the problem, or the man who has cut through the lies and obfuscations of others. He has form on truthfulness. He was fired from his first job as a journalist for fabricating quotes.

Boris Johnson's supporters appear not to worry about his lying. I suspect they will not worry about the Supreme Court decision that he acted unlawfully in attempting to prorogue Parliament. Perhaps that is because he gives every impression of believing what he says. Perhaps they *want* to believe what he says. Faith matters more than science.

If people chose to believe in something at the moment, they do not seem to want to be argued out of it. When people assert that the weight of evidence on Brexit will be what decides its outcome, John Curtice, the political scientist, points out that it has not so far. In three years, polls suggest the public have not moved much from their original positions.

So how do we deal with this faith-based attitude towards news?

There's an aphorism that has become popular with the kind of hard-bitten journalist who believes we are making the craft too complicated.

"If one person says that it is raining and another person says that it is sunny, our job is to look out of the window."

I wish it were so simple. Brexit has not actually happened. Many people believe it will be dreadful when it does, others insist all will be well. We are being asked to report weather *forecasts* as if they are matters of fact.

That doesn't matter, for people have picked their own side. And tend not to listen to the other. Each seems ready to hear only a reflection of its own views. Who owns the news, owns the narrative. People get cross when they hear a voice with which they disagree.

The Defence Secretary asked to see me recently. It was a gesture of support. He said that he valued the Today programme because he wanted his children to grow up with a sense of fair and impartial news and we were the best shot at this.

Tanks and armies are giving way to information warfare. Russia is expert at it. Free media are under assault in Turkey. Populist and powerful barons are directing newspapers and broadcasters in east European countries that were recently overjoyed to escape Soviet control. ...

Even here, open debate threatens to fall victim to the culture wars. Identity politics rage across the social media. I met the Hungarian ambassador recently. He told me that attempts by warring factions to police speech and thought here in the UK reminded him of the Communist era in the 1960s and 70s. He asked why Jacob Rees Mogg was described as a religious extremist. The term for his beliefs used to be Roman Catholic.

Ah, but the ambassador is from Hungary, fast developing its own pariah status. A celebrated British media figure who met the ambassador at a function refused to shake his hand because he regarded him as a racist and beyond the pale. "Has he travelled much?" asked the ambassador.

Who we are prepared to shake hands with becomes a modern dilemma. The equivalent for the Today programme is who appears on it.

We may be about to have an election, and the Conservatives' position is much influenced by the votes for the Brexit party. In a discussion of this, the Today programme speaks to Nigel Farage. Outrage on Twitter. Representation is endorsement.

But if we are doing the government's work for it, the government sure isn't helping. Dominic Cummings, whom some refer to now as the prime minister, seems to feel that we are best avoided. For some reason, there is a preference for television clips of Boris Johnson at the bedside of sick children (though we saw last week how that kind of hospital picture opportunity can go wrong).

So how should we go about reporting news?

The advent of 24 hour news and instant access to the internet have forced all of us to think again. For newspaper readers and morning radio audiences, there are very few events that come as a surprise.

The exceptions I can think of are The Notre Dame fire, the New Zealand mosque shootings, the Manchester terror attacks, Grenfell Tower, a general election the day after, referendum results...

There are news stories that come from investigations – alas we can't afford an investigative unit at the Today programme...

There are stories that come from reports and investigations by outside agencies – it is remarkable how many of those conclude that the problem will be solved only by the government spending more money...

And there are stories we make ourselves by getting figures at the centre of events on to the programme and asking them questions that make news.

We really don't care much about whether that is good or bad news for the government, good or bad news for the opposition. We just want it to be news.

Social media creates a whole new area not so much of news, but of noise.

The rise of social media allows people to live in an environment that echoes their own views and rejects all challenge.

You may be familiar with the 1999 sociology experiment conducted by Christopher Chabris and Daniel Simons. They showed a video of basketball players, some in white shirts some in black. They asked viewers to count how many times the players in white passed the ball. Half way through a figure in a gorilla suit walks across the court, thumps its chest and walks off. More than half the viewers did not notice this. They were too busy watching what they expected to see.

Social media allows politicians to put across a point of view that is unchallenged by any form of interrogation. In the United States Donald Trump has made Twitter his direct, unmediated communication with supporters – and, incredibly, foreign governments. In the UK the prime minister now explores the Facebook chat as a means of talking directly. We would like him to come and answer real questions on the Today programme. Alas, we cannot make him.

Social media also gives power to new, organized lobbying movements. Causes, reaching thousands of people, are capturing the news agenda more effectively than political parties. Interestingly, they see the attention of old media organisations as a plus.

This summer we had on the Today programme one of the founders of Extinction Rebellion, fresh from demonstrations that halted parts of London. Nick Robinson properly questioned the point of the disruption to the working lives of others and thus the economy. What was she actually achieving? "Well it has got me onto the Today programme."

And if the new style political campaigners are good at getting themselves on air, they are also clever at trying to force their opponents off.

David Davis is an elected MP and was Brexit secretary. Nigel Farage created Brexit. Jacob Rees Mogg is Leader of the House. According to many of the campaigning Remainers, none of these men should be given a voice.

On the other side, Brexiteers are furious that business voices do not collectively echo their own optimism. They somehow blame the BBC for this.

Are there some people who cannot be allowed on air? Isn't censorship what stirs support for populist demagogues? I reckon there are a few things we can all agree demand only disgust, no discussion. They do not warrant an impartial hearing. The philosophy of Hitler and the Nazis? Paedophilia? I might offer communism, but for all the genocidal efforts of Stalin and Mao, I think I am going to lose that one.

But the rest should be up for debate.

A debate many are trying to shut down.

They do it partly by creating new narratives. These gain traction from repeated telling. People will rise and condemn speakers on the basis of a Twitter storm without actually listening to what they have said – it is enough to be told to be outraged.

This is what happened to the philosopher Roger Scruton. He was sacked from a government appointed post within hours of Twitter reports about an interview with the New Statesman. Social media, quickly gathering a snowball of angry critics who did not bother with the evidence, decided Scruton was a villain. Social media was wrong. Scruton produced a transcript of his interview, which read rather differently. He got an apology and was reinstated.

Twitter was wrong too about my former colleague John Humphrys. John had a habit of asking questions listeners wanted answering. Many interviewers hedge around difficult questions. "Some might say you are...." "What would you say to the accusation that...." John didn't. He was, as a result, widely condemned on Twitter as a Brexiteer. I was interested in this narrative, for John had confided that he voted to Remain. He's written that up in his memoirs, just published. It's been reported. Has it made a difference? Of course not. An established narrative is very hard to shift.

You've probably noticed that Remain has created an unchallenged narrative – that the BBC screwed up its coverage of the referendum. That the BBC - accidentally -brought about Brexit. There is, runs this narrative, an essential truth that the BBC failed to reveal. It did not expose the lies of the Brexiteers. For some the BBC must be held to account for this. Some go as far as believing the BBC must be broken up for its failure.

I think I am entitled to a view on this, for I wasn't at the BBC during the referendum.

It has been accused of confusing due impartiality with false equivalence – seeking balance by countering Remain analysis with Brexit bluster

I listened to the BBC every day from years before I joined. I certainly heard discussion of all the potential downside of Brexit that the BBC is now accused of avoiding. It covered the subject comprehensively.

So what is the role of the Today programme? We are a forum for reason. We present witnesses, and interrogate them. We hope the audience can then reach their own informed view. It is not our role to pick a side or to proselytize. And, of course, we do it over three hours, during which time listeners will come in and out.

So when Alastair Campbell emailed to ask why John Humphrys was interviewing David Davis about his views on a no deal, instead of talking to someone with pro-European views, I am sorry, I know I shouldn't, but I responded. I knew that Campbell is impetuous, so I broke off from the programme for a minute to message back that the previous interviewee was Kenneth Clarke. Will HE JUST LISTEN TO THE WHOLE PROGRAMME.

The last time Campbell unleashed his fury on Today for failing to carry a People's Vote champion; he could have waited only a minute for the next interview with Margaret Beckett. IF HE WOULD JUST LISTEN TO THE WHOLE PRORAMME.

The Today programme is relentless politically calibrated, but Brexit warriors on both sides hear what they want to hear and there is a trigger reaction. If it is not Campbell, it is my old editor and friend Charles Moore, with his own points of order, or Peter Lilley or yes – I know shouldn't have encouraged him - the splendid Sir Richard Storey.

Recently, we had Peter Osborne of the Daily Mail on the programme to say that he had changed his mind on Brexit. He was an ardent Brexiteer who had decided, LOOKING AT THE EVIDENCE... that he was wrong. It looked like a brilliant illustration of the Keynes saying: "When I'm wrong, I change my mind." Remainers embraced Osborne like the prodigal son.

But then Fraser Nelson came on the programme. Having looked at the same evidence, he came to the opposite conclusion. He felt more firmly than ever that it was right to leave.



We have turned to business to try to establish the facts on the ground – Mark Carney likes to give his big interviews to the Today programme. But it is also the case that Brexit is not just about the economy. It is political, philosophical, legal, parliamentary. And it is past, present and future. Peter Lilley challenges our Reality Check department, saying he knows more about the subject of WTO rules than anyone. Does mastery of the facts guarantee omnipotent disinterest? Facts can still lead to different interpretations.

So the dreaded "equivalence" is sometimes an effective adversarial way of getting to the truth. Two competing testimonies are pitted against each other, the basis of our courts and parliament. Our interviewers give both a fair hearing, and hold each view to account. Listeners need as much information as they can possibly get. Selective arguments are dangerous.

I know that there is a fashion for a different way of pursuing truth. On some commercial channels interviewers are clear about their political views. I think we can work out where Nigel Farage stands on LBC. As are his ideological opposites. James O'Brien. This blurring of impartiality is entering the bloodstream of political interviewing. Politicalised listeners expect to hear cheering or booing from the interviewer. They do not buy the old tried and tested devil's advocate method any more.

I happen to know that the strongest belief that exists among Today programme presenters is impartiality. Nothing else comes close. And the trouble with commercial interviewers having views in these febrile times is that those without views are regarded by some not as impartial, but as liars.

What I know to be journalistic curiosity, some politicised listeners hear as complicity or coded encouragement. Their minds become as closed to other arguments as the people they fight against.

Do you remember David Hare's Pravda, about an autocratic newspaper proprietor. I don't know who it was modelled on, but it premiered just as Rupert Murdoch was moving his presses to Wapping. The character says, in paraphrase, that he has a library with a thousand books, but he has not read any of them. Because he has already made up his mind.

I worry that is where we have got to today, with so many taking entrenched positions.

Social media has become a political enforcer, confirming imagined fears. Alastair Campbell may accuse me of bias, and I can happily take him on by text and email.

But those who read his tweets, do not think, I wonder if this is true? They do not think: I will go and listen to the WHOLE PROGRAMME for myself.

They think: I KNEW IT! Conspiratorial narratives can be constructed quickly and spread algorithmically.

Today even my colleague Laura Kuenssberg, political editor, is under attack. She pointed out that the figure who approached the prime minister in Whipps Cross Hospital last week was a Labour campaigner. He was. It's a fact.

Labour critics condemned her as a Tory plant and demanded she be sacked. The presenter of Channel 4 News made the very same point and no one turned a hair.

So are we guilty? Have we failed? We have done the long view – Jonathan Freedland on literally this subject, the short view, the big picture. We have done how it appears to the rest of the world, and constituency by constituency, industry by industry. We have done macro and micro. We have done it despite our listeners begging us to stop, and paying the price in audience figures.

Except for the time when stuff is actually happening. Our listeners have the good sense to listen to this, and to tune out when the news seems pre-determined.

Of course we do not judge everything perfectly. We reflect the society and times that we are in. For instance, world opinion has changed on climate change. So far as climate change stories are concerned, these stories have depended on projections, albeit ones from a serious and overwhelming body of opinion. But once climate change became apparent in real time, there has been a scramble to get on the right side of history.

I reckon the last person to challenge the science was Nigel Lawson, who came onto the Today programme over a year ago. He was invited on FOR ONE REASON - as a former chancellor, to discuss who should pay for green subsidies.

Unhappily he went rogue for a couple of minutes on his doubts about the relationship between extreme weather and climate change. He charged off on air and we failed to bring him under control.

I don't know how Facebook would deal with this, but the BBC underwent two enquiries and compulsory reeducation.

After the Nigel Lawson intervention on the Today programme, it was generally agreed that questioning climate change was a public health issue, not a free speech issue. It was so irresponsible, that mavericks forfeited their right to be heard. We are up for that, to the anger of some right wing commentators who do not accept the science.

Understanding is everything. It is the joy to me of radio above television, is that it is the medium for analysis. You can give context, and history and perspective.

If only the world were in a mood to listen. Some people feel so strongly, they feel truths, they feel them in their waters, rather than making strictly evidence based judgements.

And some, let us be clear, don't feel them at all. I was reminded of this when I was talking to the wife of an academic and professional polemicist at a party recently. She looked back and forth among a group of Simon Schama, Max Hastings, Alan Yentob and some raunchy Brexiteers, including her writer son. "The thing is," she said. "I really don't give a fuck about Brexit."

We need to be aware of a culture of contempt. And we need to regain our curiosity about the lives and opinions of others before rushing to judgement.

As a journalist, I am endlessly interested in what other people think. I thought Parliament has been magnificent and riveting, though we should also remember that constant media attention drives people nuts. What are all those journalists and MPs going to do once no one wants to put a camera on them? They will get withdrawal symptoms once the cameras move on.

Only listen, only connect. Emotions are running high, and the BBC attracts extraordinary attention. So be it. I believe that it is a fundamentally benign news organisation, and it is the only model set up for impartiality. That alone justifies its existence. It is, in the end, utterly unlike newspapers – a different state of mind, a different philosophy, public rather than private ownership.

But I am in danger of banging on about the BBC. I am afraid everyone there does. There are many other channels of communication out there. And if we feel we are getting it in the neck there are many Remainers who blame the right-wing press for encouraging anyone to think of leaving the EU in the first place.

So what would they do? Silence opposition opinion? License papers? Compel the BBC to interview differently? Force young people to listen to the news? Whose news?

When things are going wrong there is a natural tendency to blame our institutions. Our government is wrong. Parliament is not working.

The media are not doing their job. We have failed to reveal essential truths that would have encouraged – for this is where the line tends to go – people to vote more sensibly. Can we consider whether our difficulties lie not so much in failures on the part of institutions, but in the seemingly intractable nature of the argument?

Certainly I can think of no remedy that causes less trouble than the disease.

I would also say journalists are not as cocky as they seem. We hate to get things wrong. We think hard about improvement.

We're caught here in the middle of a violent culture war and we are doing our best to report what is going on. Journalists have only ever promised the first draft of history. As events accelerate, even that task is getting harder. The best we can hope for is to have been right at the time.

I am finding it calming to read Thomas Carlyle, on the nature of controversy and truth:

"The dust of controversy, what is it but the falsehood flying off from all manner of conflicting true forces, and making such a loud dust-whirl wind – that so the truths alone may remain and embrace brother-like in some true resulting force. It is ever so..."

Today the war has raged more violently than ever. The dust whirl wind to which Carlyle referred is almost choking. We in the media have attempted to reach some truths. I really hope that those truths will endure, but I fear another set will be along tomorrow.