

### **Brian Winston: An Appreciation**

It is very sad to report that our long-time editorial board member Brian Winston died after a short illness, complicated by a fall, on 8 April. His lively contributions to our meetings were never less than intellectually exhilarating, and his numerous articles for the journal combine a quite remarkable knowledge of journalism history (by no means only British) with a razor-sharp engagement with many of the most pressing journalistic issues of the present day.

Brian grew up in a Jewish family in north London, and attended Kilburn grammar school. After that he studied law at Merton College, Oxford, from 1960 to 1963, and when he had graduated he spent two years as a researcher for Granada's *World in Action*. Following this, from 1965 to 1971, he worked as a producer/director for a wide range of programmes for the BBC and Granada.

From television he moved into academia, in 1971 becoming media course director at Alvenscot college, a private sixth-form school, followed by a lectureship at Bradford College of Art from 1972 to 1973, when his first book, *The Image of the Media*, was published. After that he moved to the sociology department of Glasgow University, where he was one of the founders of the seminal Glasgow University Media Group. In 1976 he took up a post at New York University, becoming a professor in 1979 and chairing the cinema studies programme. Whilst there he wrote a script for the documentary series *Heritage: Civilization and the Jews* for WNET-TV, which brought him an Emmy in 1985. His next job, from 1986 to 1992, was as dean of the College of Communications at Pennsylvania State University, after which he returned to the UK, heading the Centre for Journalism Studies at the University of Wales from 1992 to 1997, and then the School of Communication, Design and Media at Westminster University from 1997 to 2002. For the last two decades of his life, until March this year, Brian worked at the University of Lincoln, a city where he was closely involved in the Jewish community. In 2007, the university awarded him its highest honour, the title of the Lincoln professor.

In 2011 Brian helped to found the British Association of Film, Television and Screen Studies and was its first chair. He also served as a BFI governor and a Grierson Trustee, and advised the Sheffield International Documentary Festival.

The fact that Brian had very considerable practical experience in television documentary gave his critical work on the media, and especially on journalism, particular authority. And that work covered a quite remarkably wide area: the history, ethics and techniques of the documentary; the growth of the communications industries; censorship and freedom of expression; human rights; press and television history; and, most recently, the question of “fake news”. His numerous publications that are particularly relevant to journalism, and thus to readers of the *BJR*, include contributions to the Glasgow University Media Group books *Bad News* (1976) and *More Bad News* (1980), which presented the first really substantial challenge to the received wisdom that television news on the BBC and ITV was neutral, objective and impartial. Needless to say, it absolutely infuriated the broadcasters, but this is a theme to which Brian returned again and again in his work, not least his articles for the *BJR*. For example, in “Say Goodnight, Nurse”, *BJR* 15: 1, 2004, Brian, in typically forthright fashion, dismissed the notion of “due impartiality” as “a threadbare attempt on the part of our political masters to curtail free expression by limiting the range of acceptable opinions on air” and “a fraud perpetrated on the public because it flogged the idea that news and current affairs offered unbiased accounts of the world when actually their predominant effect was to produce a small-c conservative picture of events”.

Brian’s concern with freedom of expression – and not only for journalists – is greatly in evidence in *Messages: Free Expression, Media and the West from Gutenberg to Google* (2005), which stressed the media’s importance as an essential driver of free expression, which underpins all human rights because, without it, none of the others can be guaranteed. These concerns were also very much to the fore in *A Right to Offend* (2012) and *The Rushdie Fatwa and After: A Lesson to the Circumspect* (2014), in which he tackled the issues surrounding the controversy

arising from the publication of *The Satanic Verses* in 1988 and, in particular criticised those who called for its banning on the grounds that it was offensive to some. Unsurprisingly his passionate, but always highly principled, defence of freedom of expression, meant that he was absolutely scathing about certain newspapers' endless campaigns against the Human Rights Act. For example, in "Have You Actually Read the HRA?", in *BJR* 17: 3, 2006, whose argument is even more urgent now than when it was first written, Brian declared:

Given the authoritarian tendencies of our rulers and their rude way with our ancient liberties, the HRA comes none too soon. It is our best bulwark against such attacks. It makes putting the press under direct statutory control, the ultimate threat, that much more difficult. For the press to be frightening the public by attacking the HRA for the sake of silly splashes is more than just ignorant. Were we to withdraw from the Convention and repeal the Act, the ultimate anti-HRA position, no section of our society would be rendered more vulnerable to losing a basic freedom than the papers that would have helped to bring this about. For the press to indulge in constant HRA scaremongering is potentially, and ridiculously, self-destructive.

One of the most distinctive features of Brian's work, whatever its particular topic, is its quite extraordinary degree of knowledge of the history of the subject under consideration. But this is knowledge worn lightly. Typical of Brian is the opening of "Great on Scandals, Useless on Science", *BJR* 32; 3, 2021, which is a detailed critique, written with Graham R. Law, of science coverage in British newspapers, focussing in particular on how they failed to "speak truth to science" during the early days of the pandemic.

Ever since Marchmont Needham, the *Mercurius Britannicus* publisher, got hold of secret papers found in the panniers on the defeated Charles I's horse after the battle of Naseby (June 14, 1645), the newspaper scoop revealing sensational, secret information has lain at the heart of the Anglophone press's exercise of free expression.

The great value of an approach so thoroughly steeped in the history of its subject, in this case journalism, is that it not only illustrates the deep roots of many of its current problems and challenges but also shows that these are nothing like as new as is frequently supposed in our era of life in the eternal present. It also avoids one of the besetting sins of certain kinds of media history, namely technological determinism. All of these virtues are evident in Brian's writing about the internet. Indeed, as far back as *Misunderstanding Media* (1986), he was taking on the utopians of the "information revolution", suggesting that the phrase was nothing more than a rhetorical gambit. Examining in considerable detail the complex histories of four central information technologies crucial to the modern age – telephones, television, computers and satellites – and analysing how they were created and made widely available, he shows that instead of revolution there was just "business as usual". Similarly, in his article on the possible impact of the internet on newspapers, "There's Still Hope for Newspapers", *BJR*, 11: 2, 2000, he argues that in order to understand what this impact might be one first of all needs to cut through common misunderstandings about both forms of communication:

Newspapers are the product of a long-established social and economic system. They will change, as they have always done in the past, only when society changes and not before. They have never changed because the technology offered the possibility of new developments. Technology does not drive in this way. There is no reason to suppose that this is not the case now; especially since the much vaunted "structural advantages" of the internet over print are about as useful as bicycles to fish.

Brian applied exactly the same considerations in his work on "fake news", one of the expressions of which is the book that he wrote with his son Matthew, *The Roots of Fake News: Objecting to Objectivity* (2021) – very sadly, his last. "Roots" indicates the book's focus on the historical antecedents of this phenomenon, and "objectivity" clearly indicates that it is dealing with one of Brian's lifelong concerns. But, characteristically, these perspectives are employed to argue that

“fake news” stems not from social media or tabloidization but from problems inherent in the way in which professional journalism has traditionally perceived its role and carried out its functions. In particular, the Winstons contend, the real problem is “the vulnerability to attack which journalism creates through its own claims of virtue – of neutrality and objectivity and truthfulness”. This is because the press does not make clear what it means by truthfulness, and indeed has often been quite cavalier with the “truth”, however defined. They argue that from the fifteenth century onwards, “for the press, ‘truth’ in effect always been more of a brand than a promise – more of a sales pitch and marketing slogan than any sort of reliable descriptor of product”, with the resultant problem that it has become ever more visible to the public that “the product does not entirely correspond to the manufacturer’s claims”. In their view, then, “what is most concerning is not fiction shot through with fact and then labelled as journalism, but the truths, such as they are, of well-intentioned journalism appearing to be tainted, whether by lies or otherwise, while claiming a high standard of objectivity, honesty, accuracy, etc.”.

By no means everyone would agree, which is why it would have made a perfect subject for an article in the *BJR* and a sparky discussion at the editorial board. It is one of the many sadnesses engendered by Brian’s death that these will not now happen, and we shall miss him greatly.

*It’s the Media, Stupid! Essays in Honour of Brian Winston*, Richard Lance Keeble (ed.), Abramis Academic Publishing, 2022.

