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OSC Media Aid: United Kingdom -- Profiles of Influential Political Commentators

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OSC analysts and UK media observers deem the following 10 commentators to be among the most influential in Britain, listened to and read by cabinet ministers, business leaders, and fellow journalists. Many of them have close links to senior politicians and have been responsible for breaking stories that set the political agenda.



Nick Robinson
(bbc.co.uk)

Nick Robinson, 44, BBC political editor, occupies what is generally considered the most important job in British political journalism. His interpretation of the day's events at Westminster sets the tone for the corporation's coverage across television, radio, and the Internet (*The Times*, 20 June 2005; *The Guardian*, 14 July). Robinson is responsible for the BBC's flagship news programs, including BBC One's "Ten O'Clock News" -- which has more than 5 million viewers every night -- and Radio 4's "Today" program.

Robinson has carved out a niche as a persistent irritant to world leaders, including President Bush and former Prime Minister Blair.

- He received a "hard stare" when he suggested to the US president in late 2006 that he was "in denial" about Iraq, a remark that "publicly irritated" the president and provoked another verbal exchange with Robinson at a news conference the following year (bbc.co.uk, 7 December 2006; *The Guardian*, 14 July; bbc.co.uk, 30 July 2007).
- Robinson embarrassed Blair during the May 2005 general election over a misleading campaign poster, using hostile questioning tactics until the prime minister admitted that it was disingenuous. More recently, a group of MPs were so angered by Robinson's BBC blog on parliamentary expenses that they proposed a formal debate on his activities in the House of Commons (*Evening Standard*, 4 May 2005; *The Guardian*, 26 February).
- A commentator in center-left daily *The Guardian* said that, if the ability to "irk" those in power is a "measure" of influence in the media, then Robinson "has it in spades." A political observer told the paper that Robinson is "hugely influential," adding that, if a politician wants to get a story out, he is the "one they brief" (14 July).

Robinson is one of the "lobby correspondents," a small group of parliamentary journalists with privileged access to certain parts of Parliament, and reports on domestic political issues ranging from events in the House of Commons and at cabinet meetings to the party political conferences. He also accompanies the prime minister on his official visits abroad.

Biographic Profile Nick Robinson was appointed BBC political editor in June 2005. He had been the chief political editor of Independent Television News since 2002. From 1999 to 2002, he was the chief political correspondent of BBC News 24. He joined BBC in 1986, working originally in television and radio. Robinson was educated at Oxford University, is married, and has three children (bbc.co.uk, 10 October).



Adam Boulton
(typepad.com)

Adam Boulton, 49, political editor of Sky News -- a 24-hour commercial satellite news channel -- is one of the most influential political journalists at Westminster. He hosts the flagship current affairs program "Sunday Live" as well as the weekly "Prime Minister's Questions" broadcast. He has interviewed every British prime minister since Sir Alex Douglas-Home and is the only reporter known to have asked Queen Elizabeth an impromptu question live on camera. Both BBC and Downing Street have tried unsuccessfully to lure him away from Sky (sky.com, 10 October; *The Independent*, 27 May 2007; *The Observer*, 16 July 2006).

Despite Sky's small market share, Boulton enjoys wide viewership among Britain's political elite and an almost unrivalled reputation for breaking high-profile stories.

- Sky News had a 0.48 percent audience share from January to mid-June 2008 -- compared with 0.68 percent for BBC News -- but is primarily watched by politicians, journalists, and business leaders, giving Boulton extra influence, according to media reports (thersa.org, 22 August; *The Observer*, 16 July 2006). One observer called Boulton "the leader of the political pack, the alpha male" because he was watched in Westminster and every newsroom "up and down the country" (*The Guardian*, 14 July).
- A media insider told the website of the Royal Society for the Encouragement of the Arts that Boulton was a "genuine political nutter" who was thought to have spent more hours covering breaking news stories than any other journalist (thersa.org, 22 August). Boulton's blog, "Boulton & Co.," also focuses on breaking news and gossip from Westminster.

Boulton, a lobby correspondent, focuses on breaking political news at Westminster and often delivers his reports and commentaries on the day's events live on camera from outside 10 Downing Street and the House of Commons. He often accompanies the prime minister on his official visits abroad.

Biographic Profile Adam Boulton has been political editor of Sky News since 1989. He had previously been political editor of TV-am. He was educated at Oxford and the Johns Hopkins Universities. Boulton is married to Anji Hunter, a former top Blair aide, and they have five children (sky.com, 10 October).



Robert Peston, 48, BBC business editor -- one of the corporation's most important roles -- is Gordon Brown's biographer and, according to press reports, has "unusually close" links to Downing Street (*Daily Mail*, 14 June). Peston appears on BBC radio, the popular "Ten O'Clock News," and online with his BBC blog "Peston's Picks," which -- according to *The Independent* -- is read by 1 million people (11 February).

A fellow journalist commented that "powerful people will always take Peston's call" (*The Daily*

Robert Peston
(bbc.co.uk)

Telegraph, 24 January) because he is known for his influential contacts and his ability to break big stories.

- Peston is the author of *Brown's Britain* (2005), an account of the rivalry between Gordon Brown and Tony Blair, and *Who Runs Britain?* (2008), described by *The Guardian* as a "lucid and timely guide to the world of turbo-capitalism" in which he predicted the global financial crisis (14 July).
- Known as the man with the "golden contacts book" and as a "confidant" of central bankers and captains of industry, Peston revealed the collapse of the Northern Rock bank on 13 September 2007, for which he won the Royal Television Society's "Scoop of the Year" award (*The Daily Telegraph*, 24 January; *The Observer*, 17 February; *The Independent*, 29 September).

Biographic Profile Robert Peston was appointed business editor of BBC in 2006. He had previously spent 20 years writing on business and finance for *The Sunday Telegraph*, the *Financial Times*, and *The Independent*. Peston was educated at Oxford University, is married, and has two children (bbc.co.uk, 10 October).



Polly Toynbee, 62, a columnist for *The Guardian*, is regarded as one of Britain's most important current social democratic thinkers concerned about widening societal divisions. Known for her campaigning approach to social affairs, Toynbee is close to the current government and is embraced as one of New Labour's "own" (*The Scotsman*, 25 August; *The Independent*, 17 July 2006; *The Daily Telegraph*, 26 November 2006). She regularly writes on a wide range of sociopolitical issues such as marriage, education, religion, immigration, and poverty.

Polly Toynbee
(guardian.co.uk)

The Guardian reported that Toynbee was voted the United Kingdom's "most influential" commentator in a poll conducted by a media analysis firm, topping both public survey results and a peer-selected list of influential journalists (14 April).

- A media observer told *The Guardian* that top politicians and law enforcement officials "love" Toynbee and often "slavishly parrot" her ideas, which then "quickly become policy." Similarly, a commentator in right-leaning *The Daily Telegraph* noted that Toynbee's approval of policy initiatives was "terribly significant" to Prime Minister Brown (9 July 2007, 19 May).
- Labeled the "queen of leftist journalists," Toynbee was described in 2006 as a "Conservative guru" when a member of Conservative Party leader David Cameron's backroom team suggested that the vision of a welfare state outlined in her book *Hard Work: Life in Low-Pay Britain* reflected Conservative social policy (*The Independent*, 26 November 2006; *The Times*, 24 November 2006).

Biographic Profile Polly Toynbee has been a columnist for *The Guardian* since 1998. She had previously served as the BBC social affairs editor, a columnist and associate editor of *The Independent*, and co-editor of the *Washington Monthly*. She began her career in journalism writing for the diary in *The Observer*. Toynbee was educated at Holland Park Comprehensive School and Oxford University but left before earning a degree (guardian.co.uk, 10 October).



Andrew Rawnsley
(bbc.co.uk)

Andrew Rawnsley, 46, associate editor and chief political commentator of *The Observer*, is considered one of the preeminent political columnists of his generation and enjoys close contacts with senior Labour politicians, according to media reports (bbc.co.uk/radio4, 10 October; *The Guardian*, 14 July). Rawnsley appears on Channel 4's "A Week in Politics" and BBC Radio 4's "The Westminster Hour" talk shows. He is also editor in chief of *PoliticsHome*, a website aggregating the latest news and political comment, and writes a daily opinion piece that summarizes the thoughts of *PoliticsHome*'s "key political insiders" who comment in a daily online poll (bbc.co.uk, channel4.com, politicshome.com, 10 October).

Rawnsley's best-selling book, *Servants of the People*, traced the history of the early years of New Labour and revealed the true extent of the infighting between Tony Blair and Gordon Brown, which other observers have validated. Rawnsley was also the first commentator to reveal Blair's belief that Brown was "psychologically flawed," a comment that deepened Brown's enmity with Blair's team (*The Independent*, 30 August 2006).

A media observer told *The Guardian* that Rawnsley's Sunday column was a must-read for those in government. Labour supporters read Rawnsley to find out "what needs to be put right and how," while Conservatives read his column to see "what the government will do next," the observer added (14 July).

Biographic Profile Andrew Rawnsley has been chief political commentator of *The Observer* since 1995. He had previously worked at *The Guardian* as a parliamentary sketch writer, offering a humorous account of events at Westminster. Rawnsley was educated at Cambridge University and is married with three children (guardian.co.uk, 10 October).



Anatole Kaletsky
(timesonline.co.uk)

Anatole Kaletsky, 56, principal economic commentator and associate editor of *The Times*, is regarded as one of the "greatest stars" of British journalism. An intellectual with center-left views, Kaletsky has argued against the UK's entry into the euro zone (*The Guardian*, 4 December 2006).

Kaletsky originally supported New Labour and Gordon Brown's economic policy but publicly changed his stance in the wake of the Northern Rock banking collapse.

- In a column written during the collapse, Kaletsky said it was justified for people to withdraw their savings from the bank, which "caused shivers" for the chancellor of the exchequer (*Evening Standard*, 3 December 2007).
- His observation in January that Brown "remains in office, but is no longer in power" was described by *The Daily Telegraph* as "strong stuff" and was a "major talking point for days" in media circles, according to media analysis website editorialintelligence.com (22, 24 January; editorialintelligence.com, April).

Biographic Profile Before joining *The Times*, Kaletsky worked for 12 years at the *Financial Times* in a number of posts. He started his career in journalism with *The Economist* in 1976. Kaletsky was educated at Cambridge and Harvard Universities (timesonline.co.uk, 10 October).



Trevor Kavanagh
(bbc.co.uk)

Trevor Kavanagh, 65, is the associate editor of Britain's best-selling daily *The Sun*, which has an average daily circulation of just over 3 million copies. He is one of the most influential political journalists in the print media and has unrivalled contacts at Westminster. Some observers claim that Kavanagh can dictate government policy and make or break parliamentary careers (abc.org.uk, 9 September, *The Independent*, 12 December, 20 March 2005). Kavanagh works from the House of Commons writing editorials, commentaries, and a weekly political column.

Kavanagh's exclusive reports often set the political agenda.

- His revelation that Tony Blair would hold a referendum on the EU Constitution, subsequently rejected by Gordon Brown, was one of his biggest scoops (*Financial Times*, 19 May 2006).
- Kavanagh's columns keep immigration, often seen as a toxic issue, at the heart of the political debate. He praised the launch of a cross-party group on immigration, describing the topic as a "legitimate issue" for the next general election (*The Sun*, 8 September).

Kavanagh is thought to be behind *The Sun's* shifting support from Labour to Conservatives. According to a report in *The Daily Telegraph*, the Conservative Party even considered trying to recruit Kavanagh as its head of communications after he praised David Cameron as the alternative to Tony Blair (4 April 2006). He is also a close confidante -- according to some observers, the "hatchet man" -- of the paper's owner, Rupert Murdoch (*The Guardian*, 1 December 2005).

Biographic Profile Trevor Kavanagh has been associate editor of *The Sun* since January 2006. He had been the paper's political editor since 1983. He had earlier worked in the paper's industrial team. He had previously worked in print and broadcasting journalism in Australia until 1978. He began his career in regional newspapers. Kavanagh was educated at Reigate Grammar School, Surrey (independent.co.uk, 20 March 2005).



Matthew d'Ancona
(bbc.co.uk)

Matthew d'Ancona, 40, editor of *The Spectator* magazine and a columnist for *The Sunday Telegraph*, is one of the few conservative commentators with excellent links to the Labour Party. A Westminster-focused columnist, the left-leaning weekly *New Statesman* regards him as one of the "must-read" Sunday political commentators (conservativehome.com, 13 February 2006; 21 July).

The pro-American d'Ancona is a member of the Atlantic Partnership, which fosters close links between America and Europe. He has supported David Cameron since his election as Tory leader and has long urged the modernization of the Conservative Party, but he has denied that *The Spectator* is the "in-house journal" of the party (*The Guardian*, 3 April 2006).

Nevertheless, under d'Ancona's editorship, *The Spectator's* weekly circulation has increased from 70,000 to almost 77,000 in the first half of 2008, giving rise to commentaries about his increasing influence (bbc.co.uk, 13 February 2006; abc.org.uk, 20 August).

- A commentator in center-left *The Guardian* said the influence of the right-wing weekly -- and its editor -- has grown along with Cameron's popularity in the polls (14 July).
- According to a commentator in center-left weekly *The Observer*, d'Ancona and his team have an "enviable opportunity" to report on and "influence" the revival in Conservative fortunes (1 April 2007).

Biographic Profile Matthew d'Ancona was appointed editor of *The Spectator* magazine in February 2006. He had been a political columnist for and deputy editor of *The Sunday Telegraph* since 1996 and had also previously worked for *The Times*. D'Ancona was educated at Oxford University and is married to Sarah Schaefer, a senior adviser to Foreign Secretary David Miliband. Schaefer was described by the *Daily Mail* as "one of the most powerful women in Gordon Brown's government." They have two children (guardian.co.uk, 3 April 2006; dailymail.co.uk, 16 September 2007).

Melanie Phillips, 57, a *Daily Mail* columnist, is one of Britain's most provocative commentators. She is renowned for her scathing criticism of the UK's moral and cultural malaise, and media observers consider her one of the Labour government's "most rabid" opponents (*The Independent*, 9 May 2005).

In addition to her twice-weekly *Daily Mail* columns, Phillips also writes for the *Jewish Chronicle*, a London-based publication serving the Jewish community, and is a regular panelist on Radio 4's "The Moral Maze" debate and the BBC's "Question Time" program. According to the *Jewish Chronicle*, she also has a "substantial following," in the United States, with thousands logging on daily to her blog (*New Statesman*, 10 March 2003; *The Guardian*, 16 June 2006; 30 March 2007).

Phillips, a supporter of the Iraq war, argued in her 2006 book *Londonistan: How Britain Is Creating a Terror State Within* that multiculturalism, immigration, and anti-Semitism have turned London into Europe's "epicenter of Islamic militancy." Phillips started a blog in 2003 that a commentator in *The Guardian* called "completely deranged," claiming that it was a "chilling guide" to what "the men shaping" US policy were thinking (16 June 2006; 9 January 2007).



Melanie Phillips
(spectator.co.uk)

Biographic Profile Melanie Phillips has been a *Daily Mail* columnist since 2001. She had previously worked for *The Guardian*, *The Observer*, and *The Sunday Times*. Phillips was educated at Oxford University, is married to Joshua Rozenberg, legal editor of *The Daily Telegraph*, and has two children (independent.co.uk, 9 May 2005).



Richard Littlejohn
(bbc.co.uk)

Richard Littlejohn, 54, a *Daily Mail* columnist, is one of the best-known and highest-paid commentators in Britain. The ABC media performance appraising service indicates that 2 million people read Littlejohn's columns (abc.org.uk, 5 September). Writing twice a week on popular political and social issues -- such as asylum seekers, the EU, pedophiles, and government and police incompetence -- Littlejohn is seen as a "fearless free thinker" and a "loudmouth" with an "instinct for the jugular and home truths," according to media observers (*The Guardian*, 17 July 2006; *The Times*, 20 May 2007). An anonymous senior aide

to a cabinet minister told *The Guardian* that Littlejohn's columns exert "influence" and matter "more" among the electorate because he writes about issues that "resonate with voters" (27 April).

Biographic Profile Richard Littlejohn joined the *Daily Mail* in 2005. He had previously spent 13 years at *The Sun*. He has also worked for the *London Evening Standard* and the *Birmingham Evening Mail*. Littlejohn left school at 16 to train as a journalist at small local papers (timesonline.co.uk, 20 May 2007).

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