

## 'An establishment newspaper': The politics of the *Eastern Daily Press*

*This paper analyses the political stance of the Norwich-based Eastern Daily Press. It uses Nick Davies's notion of 'churnalism' and Herman and Chomsky's Propaganda Model to explain, in particular, its editorial positions on the monarchy and British foreign policy. Moreover, the evidence presented suggests that the EDP's ownership and, to a lesser extent, its reliance on advertising are key reasons for its political stances. Interviews with journalists, politicians and a prominent academic support the overall argument. The paper concludes: 'Archant's monopoly in the region has a worrying influence on dissent.'*

**Keywords:** *Eastern Daily Press*, churnalism, Propaganda Model, monarchy, British foreign policy

### 'Chroniclers of their communities':

#### The importance of the regional press

Regional newspapers are often dismissed and ridiculed for being parochial, amateurish and insignificant. Yet we ignore the regional press at our peril. In 2012, there were 1,100 regional newspapers in the UK and 1,600 associated websites (*Yorkshire Times* 2013). According to the Newspaper Society, 61 per cent of British adults read a regional newspaper, compared with 53 per cent who read a national newspaper. Moreover, the regional press has what is known as 'a high solus readership' – 23 per cent of people who read a regional newspaper do not read a national newspaper (Newspaper Society 2012a). Local newspapers remain the most trusted source of news (Ponsford 2011). According to Bob Franklin (2004: 155), Professor of Journalism Studies at Cardiff University, this high level of market penetration and trust, combined with local monopolies, means 'local

newspapers may prove highly influential in defining news and setting the local agenda for their readership'.

Speaking about the role of regional newspapers in 2012, the President of the Newspaper Society (Newspaper Society 2012b) noted that 'no other medium can replicate the role of local media, in print and online, in scrutinising those in authority, supporting local businesses and communities and campaigning with and on behalf of readers'. Professor Franklin (National Assembly of Wales 2009) also believes regional newspapers have an important role to play, noting they have been:

the archivists and chroniclers of their local and regional communities, recording various rites of passage (births, marriages and deaths) of members of the communities, as well as the activities of the judicial and political elites and institutions, manifest in court reports and coverage of the proceedings of parish councils and parliaments.

The flagship newspaper in Norwich and Norfolk is the *Eastern Daily Press* (EDP). Launched in 1870, the EDP grew out of the *Norfolk News*, which began publishing in 1845. According to the official history (Clarke 2000) of the Eastern Counties Newspapers Group (the company that used to own the EDP) the *Norfolk News* was set up by a small group of rebel businessmen who were incensed by the refusal of the *Norwich Mercury*, then the dominant newspaper in the city, to report the protests of those who opposed a tax levied by the church. The men – John and Jonathan Copeman, Jeremiah Colman and Jacob Henry Tillett – hoped their new newspaper 'would shake a complacent Establishment to its very core' (Clarke 2000: 7). By 2013 the EDP's daily circulation was 47,231, with the paper claiming to be 'the best-selling regional morning daily newspaper' in England (Linford 2013).

Several of the people I interviewed for this paper agreed that the EDP does much of what the President of the Newspaper Society and Professor Franklin list. Pete Kelley, the current Letters Editor, argues the EDP helps to create 'a sense of local identity' as it gets 'a bit closer to the community' than the national press. A recent example of this community spirit and reporting was the EDP's in-depth coverage of the December 2013 storm surge. A senior Norfolk-based political figure told me: 'It is vital to have a local press scrutinising council decisions, the local economy, government

decisions that affect the county, etc. The *EDP* plays a valuable role in some of these regards.<sup>1</sup> John Greenaway, Emeritus Professor of Politics at the University of East Anglia, notes the *EDP* has 'excellent Norwich City Football Club reporting and analysis' and 'good coverage of a range of rural affairs and village green type issues'.

#### Explaining newspaper content: Nick Davies's churnalism vs. Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky's Propaganda Model

In 2008 investigative journalist Nick Davies published *Flat earth news: An award-winning reporter exposes falsehood, distortion and propaganda in the global media*. Its central argument is Davies's concept of 'churnalism', whereby the increasingly concentrated corporate ownership of the national and regional press has led to profit maximisation at all costs. With newspapers cutting costs by cutting staff, the journalists who remain at the paper are expected to do more work in less time. This has created a more pressurised working environment with less time for fact-checking and for getting out of the office to pursue a story and build up contacts. Unable to leave their desks, the stressed-out reporters are prey for PR firms, regurgitating press releases and wire copy with minimal, if any, editing. According to Davies (2008: 13), these commercial pressures have ideological consequences with journalists tending 'to produce a consensus account of the world which repeatedly reflects the interests of the rich and powerful'.

Chris Fisher, the *EDP*'s former Political Editor, confirmed the *EDP* had undergone what Davies has written about:

Over the past 30 years or so, much has changed... [the *EDP*'s owners and managers] became locked into a vicious circle – along with virtually all of the rest of the regional press – of making cuts as circulation dipped and thereby giving readers less reason for buying the paper ... I think the *EDP* is now a pale shadow of what it was. So much of its journalism is 'soft' and unchallenging, and that is no reflection on the journalists. They tend these days to be glued to computer screens, under relentless pressure to get pages into the content management system as quickly as possible by producing stories from press releases without many questions asked.

Ken Hurst, a former Business Editor at the *EDP*, agrees that Davies's thesis is 'without doubt, a

sad truth'. Kelley confirmed that over the last 30 years reporters' jobs had become 'more pressurised' but he also noted that the *EDP*'s management was aware of the dangers that Davies wrote about. 'The last three times that we've had redundancies over the last seven years which have involved editorial staff, they've protected reporting staff on news reporting,' he said. 'We'd always like to see more reporters. We do have to use re-written press releases, obviously. We always have done.'

While Davies's *Flat earth news* received rave reviews and extensive coverage in the very newspapers he was criticising, there is another critique of the mainstream media which is rarely mentioned in the press – Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky's Propaganda Model. Introduced in the 1988 book *Manufacturing consent: The political economy of the mass media*, the Propaganda Model is an attempt to understand why, in the authors' opinion, the American mass media 'serve to mobilise support for the special interests that dominate the state and private activity' (Herman and Chomsky 1994: xi). Applying an analysis of market forces, Herman and Chomsky argue five filters systematically shape the news agenda: the concentrated corporate ownership of the media; advertising as a primary source of income; the reliance on government and business sources; 'flak' received by the media; and the dominant ideology (in 1988 this was 'anti-communism').

The Propaganda Model is disliked by many journalists – including Davies. Jonathan Cook (Media Lens 2009), a former *Guardian* journalist, suggests one reason for this hostility:

A possible reason why a journalist like Davies appears incapable of considering the arguments for the Propaganda Model, let alone rebutting it, was explained by Chomsky during an interview in 1996 with another senior British journalist, Andrew Marr, then of the *Independent* newspaper and today of the BBC. Marr and other senior journalists, said Chomsky, had risen to their present positions precisely because their work did not challenge the corporate interests they served. A discomfited Marr maintained that he had never self-censored and that there were lots of 'disputatious' people in journalism. Chomsky replied: 'If you believed something different, you wouldn't be sitting where you're sitting.'

Davies surely had the Propaganda Model in mind when he referred in *Flat earth news* to 'conspiracy theories' about the media propagated by 'outsiders'. For Davies (2008: 16) the primary purpose of the corporations that own the media today 'is not propaganda. Their primary purpose simply and uncontroversially is to make money'. Regarding ownership and advertising, Davies (2008: 22) explains: 'Journalists with whom I've discussed this agree that if you could quantify it, you could attribute only 5 to 10 per cent of the problem to the total impact of these two forms of interference.' This article explores the importance of ownership and advertising to the *EDP's* politics.

**'Nothing to worry about': The politics of the *EDP***

In 2003, I wrote to the *EDP* saying I was concerned about the expansion of Archant, the company that owns the *EDP*, and its implications for the concentration of media ownership. I received a swift reply back from James Ruddy, the Deputy Editor, telling me I had 'nothing to worry about' as the *EDP* 'is a good example of the principles of fairness, independence and balance in all aspects of our coverage of the social, political, economic and other aspects of this region and this country'.<sup>2</sup> This belief in the newspaper's 'balance' and 'objectivity' is widely held among members of the newspaper's management team. Referring to Archant's stable of newspapers, Richard Jewson, the Chairman of Archant, told me the '*EDP* and others support and inform their communities, without overtly taking a particular party political stance'.<sup>3</sup> In addition, a senior manager at the *EDP*, who refused to be quoted, told me the *EDP* was not a political organisation.

Despite these self-serving denials, in reality the *EDP* often takes a strong political editorial line. Most of the people I interviewed for this article described the newspaper's politics as conservative with a small 'c'. For example, in August 2011 the *EDP* dedicated several editorials to the riots that were happening across England. Titled 'It's thuggery, and there's no excuse', the *EDP's* editorial on 9 August 2011 (2011b) argued:

Almost immediately, some left-wing commentators and people from the local 'community' were reaching deep into the anthology of clichés to blame it all on the police, racism – the victim of the police shooting was black – and the government's economic policies. All of which is tired and appalling nonsense.

The next day's editorial (*Eastern Daily Press* 2011c) continued in the same vein:

... the absolute imperative is to regain the street, and the general public wants firm action not Guardianista theorising. A *Sun* poll out today records 90 per cent support for the use of water-cannon, 82 per cent for curfews and even 33 per cent for the use of live ammunition. In other words, Mr Cameron, the public has had enough of pandering to the rights of the lawless, worse-than-useless, few.

You may agree or disagree with the *EDP's* position on the riots. However, what is unarguable is that the *EDP* took a strong political stance on the issue. And while it wasn't a party political position, the *EDP* was clearly pushing a tough, right-wing agenda in terms of its analysis and call for action.

**'Nothing of an anti-royalist nature would ever get past the gatekeepers': The *EDP's* owners and managers and the monarchy**

As mention above, the *EDP* is owned by Archant – a large corporation owned and managed by very wealthy people. As well as the *EDP*, Archant also owns three other dailies, 50 'news brands' and 80 magazines. It employs more than 1,600 people (Archant 2012a). In 2013, Archant had group operating profits of £9.4m. with a turnover of £126.6m. (Archant 2014). In 2012, Adrian Jeakings, the Chief Executive, received an annual remuneration of £397,000, according to the company's annual report (Archant 2012b).

Does the corporate ownership of the *EDP* influence the newspaper's editorial content? Not according to Jeakings (Dickson 2013), who told a House of Lords Select Committee in October 2013: 'It is totally inconceivable that the owners (of Archant) could interfere with the news agendas of any of those titles.'

The problem for Jeakings is that a former journalist at the *EDP* and a former contributor to the *EDP* both independently confirmed to me that there has been direct influence from the newspaper's ownership on one issue in particular – the monarchy. There is 'a very strict but unchronicled instruction that nothing of an anti-royalist nature would ever get past the gatekeepers', former Business Editor Hurst told me. The former contributor to the *EDP* agreed: 'The *EDP* will not promote things that are anti the monarchy.' Fisher, the *EDP's* former Political Editor, was more circumspect in

his answer: 'There is certainly no such rule in writing. But there are close links between the top of Archant and the royal family, and there was a strong feeling that Sandringham made Norfolk different.' Hurst noted this unwritten rule existed under the three *EDP* editors he worked for from the 1990s onwards (one as a full-timer and two as a freelance columnist). Several people I interviewed put this state of affairs down to the fact that the Colman family was, until very recently, a major shareholder in Archant. And Sir Timothy Colman, who from 1969 to 1996 was Chairman of Eastern Counties Newspaper Group (which became Archant in 2002), is married to Lady Mary Colman, the niece of the Queen Mother.

As well as being a major shareholder in Archant, Colman was also Lord-Lieutenant for Norfolk from 1978 to 2004. Military in origin, today the Lord-Lieutenancy is officially a ceremonial position. According to the Norfolk County Council website there are a number of official duties attached to the role, including 'arranging visits of members of the royal family and escorting royal visitors'. The council website (Norfolk County Council) also notes: 'The Queen appoints a Lord-Lieutenant as her representative in each county.'

So who became Lord-Lieutenant after Colman stepped down in 2004? It was Richard Jewson, the current Chairman of Archant. Jewson's position on the monarchy is clear from an article he wrote in 2012:

The task of the Lord-Lieutenant is to 'uphold the dignity of the crown'. That 'dignity' flows directly from Her Majesty and the impeccable way in which she has served the nation for 50 years. It is a tremendous privilege to represent the Queen in Norfolk... The images of the coronation ... which are currently being replayed on television in the run up to the Diamond Jubilee, remind us all of the calm and serious way in which this beautiful young woman accepted the responsibilities which fell upon her and made her vows of service to the nation. We should all be grateful for the way in which the Queen has adapted and modernised the monarchy throughout the reign to reflect what is required by society ... It is no doubt that the Norfolk people feel a special relationship with the Royal Family due to the amount of time that the Royal Household spends in the county (Jewson 2012).

In the interests of fairness, I should point out the *EDP* senior manager I spoke to (who refused to be quoted for this article) categorically denied any unwritten rule currently exists at the *EDP*. As did Kelley, the paper's current Letters Editor, who noted that the pro-monarchy editorial line of the *EDP* 'is less the case than it was years ago'. But when I asked him if he could point to any editorial content, outside the letters page, that had been published recently that was critical of the monarchy he said he could not think of any.

Even if one believes there is no longer an unwritten rule at the *EDP* concerning criticism of the monarchy, that this occurred in the recent past is an important discovery. The *EDP*, without the knowledge of readers, has effectively censored criticism of the monarchy – a serious action for a supposedly free newspaper. But it has to be stressed this direct interference by the *EDP*'s owners and management on editorial content is likely to be a very rare occurrence. The influence of the paper's owners 'is much less than people assume', notes Kelley. And even if there was an attempt at interference 'it would be a row because the editor would stand up for himself', he says. Fisher concurs, noting: 'Any interference in the editorial line by the board or by non-editorial senior management is extremely rare.'

However, the web-based media watchdog Media Lens (2008) argues: 'The focus on overt interference is a liberal herring.' As George Seldes, the famous critic of the American press said of his fellow journalists in 1931: 'The most stupid boast in the history of present-day journalism is that of the writer who says: "I have never been given orders; I am free to do as I like." We scent the air of the office. We realise that certain things are wanted, certain things unwanted' (Media Lens 2004). As in any large organisation, subordinates in newsrooms across the country quickly come to understand what their superiors think and expect of them, and will likely change their behaviour to suit this. Those who do not fit in with the dominant culture or choose to go against the grain will be made to feel uncomfortable, be overlooked for promotion or let go. This reality was confirmed recently by David Yelland (2013), the former Editor of the *Sun*: 'Too often anyone who challenges the *status quo* is ejected from the group or sidelined. Indeed, many papers remain dictatorships: anyone who challenges the editor does not last long. This applies even more to proprietors.'

Dismissing the focus on overt interference, Herman and Chomsky argue, says Pilger (2009), a key process is 'the selection of right-thinking personnel and by the editors' and working journalists' internalisation of [elite] priorities and definitions of newsworthiness'. For a good example of this power-friendly internalisation one need look no further than current *EDP* Editor Nigel Pickover's testimony (2012) to the Leveson Inquiry: 'Not once, in 16 years as editor [of the Ipswich *Evening Star*, another Archant paper], has any pressure been laid at my decision making by my proprietors. *Often such an issue is avoided by an editor's commonsense in pre-warning senior colleagues before any difficulty may arise*' (my emphasis).

Most importantly, we need to remember the *EDP* editor is appointed by Archant's board. It defies logic to think Archant's senior management would hire an editor who would question or challenge their authority or position, or fundamentally critique the local and national political and business elites from which the board is taken. Rather they will hire someone with similar politics and view of journalism as themselves. Differences may well exist between the hired editor and senior management – human and commercial interactions are complex and changeable things, after all – but will likely be small.

**'The *EDP* tends to cosy up to power': Advertising, business and the environment**

Like other regional newspapers the *EDP* receives around 60-70 per cent of its revenues from advertising. However, Kelley argues the idea that advertisers and advertising influence editorial content is 'a myth pretty much'. He notes he has never come across an example of this happening: 'Newspapers have to be respected by the community and advertisers recognise that as well. If the idea starts to get about ... that newspapers are in the pockets of major advertisers, you lose credibility.' Speaking about the *EDP* in 2012, Hurst had a very different take on this question:

Readers must be left to draw their own conclusions but directly or indirectly, the answer has to be 'yes'. The three pillars of advertising revenue used to be Recruitment, Motors and Property. With recruitment advertising all but migrated to online job boards, this left Property (fast going the same way) and Motors. I venture that you will never read any critical coverage of either subject in the *EDP*. Car reviews are always glowing and the new-look Friday property

section now somewhat hilariously promotes its favourite estate agents as its new star columnists.

The senior Norfolk-based political figure I interviewed agrees: 'It isn't possible for the *EDP* to play with a straight bat where advertisers are concerned.'

Another aspect of the relationship between advertising and editorial to note is how supportive editorial is placed next to advertising – think of the motoring pages, for example. This policy of matching editorial content to advertising is, of course, not followed for critical editorial because the advertiser would be very unhappy if their advert was placed next to content that directly criticised their product.

Advertising that is critical of Archant is unlikely to be welcomed. For example, in 2006, 17 editorial jobs were under threat at the *EDP* and *Evening News*. In response, the National Union of Journalists chapter at Archant asked to place an advert in the *EDP* highlighting the job cuts they were facing to communicate the situation to readers. The advert began with the line: 'Firm with £32m profits to axe staff ... pay cuts also threatened. It's not a nice headline is it?' The Managing Director of Archant Norfolk refused to run the advert (Timms 2006).

More generally, the *EDP* has a strong pro-business editorial line. According to the senior Norfolk-based political figure: 'The *EDP* tends to cosy up to power' and 'tends to welcome anything that involves a short-medium term boost to businesses in the region'.

A key document to consider is the 2001 *Shaping the future strategy: The economic development strategy for Norfolk 2001-10*. The report was produced by Shaping Norfolk's Future (SNF), a public-private partnership of local elites and businesses funded by Norfolk County Council, of which Richard Jewson was a founding member. In the report SNF sets out the five top transport infrastructure projects for the region they would lobby for in the future: the dualling of the A11 and A47 roads, an expansion of Norwich airport, the building of the Norwich Northern Distributor Road and the building of the Outer Harbour in Great Yarmouth (Norfolk County Council 2001). The *EDP* has supported all of these transport projects, despite strong opposition from local communities and environmental groups in many instances (*Eastern Daily Press* 2004, *Eastern Daily Press* 2005, *Eastern Daily Press* 2010; *Eastern Daily*

Press 2011d, *Eastern Daily Press* 2014). The links between the *EDP* and SNF run deep. From 2007-2009, the Chairman of SNF was John Fry, who was also Archant's Chief Executive from 2002-8. Between 2008 and 2011, SNF's Chief Executive was Chris Starkie, who had just finished five years working as the *EDP*'s Business Editor. In 2011 SNF was dissolved, superseded by the New Anglia Local Enterprise Partnership, with Starkie as its Managing Director.

### 'Backing the deployment of troops wherever the government chooses': The *EDP* and UK foreign policy

When I asked Kelley how the *EDP*'s editorial line was decided he noted: 'Our voice is very much decided by what we judge the voice of the community is.' To illustrate this point he told me about a recent incident:

A couple of guys [readers] thought we were too much in favour of the incinerator at King's Lynn. They came in for a conversation with the Managing Director Johnny Hustler about it. I was quite interested in the fact he said to them, referring to the *EDP*: 'If we were a King's Lynn newspaper we would be against the incinerator because a majority of the readers would be but as we are a Norfolk-wide newspaper we are more even-handed, and at times have been looking pro-incinerator.' So he was actually quite openly saying we actually draw our political line, or our social line, to a great extent from what our readers tell us they think. In late 2012, a new editor – Nigel Pickover – took over the *EDP*, and it was clear that the paper quickly distanced itself from the incinerator, taking a more equivocal stance. This does, to me, support the argument that, while we're looking to reflect our readers' views, the company does – rightly – give its editors freedom to set the tone.

The idea the media 'give the people what they want' is a popular argument but is contradicted by the *EDP*'s editorial position on war and peace issues. On foreign policy, the *EDP* supports the retention of Trident nuclear weapons (2012) and has supported every major British war since the 1956 Suez Crisis (1956: 4) irrespective of public opinion – the Falklands War (1982: 6), the first Gulf War (1991: 10), Kosovo (1999: 20), Afghanistan (2001: 16), Iraq in 2003 and Libya (2011a).<sup>4</sup> 'The *EDP* strongly "supports our troops",' argues the senior Norfolk-based political figure. 'This, it takes to mean not opposing the deployment of British soldiers recklessly into harm's way, but

backing the deployment of troops wherever the government chooses, and running human interest stories accordingly.'

During the 2003 invasion of Iraq (from 20 March 2003 to 10 April 2003 – the day the statue of Saddam Hussein was toppled in Baghdad), the *EDP*'s coverage was dominated by pro-war columnists such as Chris Fisher and Martin Mears, who had 14 articles published. In contrast, just one anti-war op-ed piece was published during the war – by *EDP* regular columnist Ian Collins. At the time Collins was the 'anti-war' voice at the *EDP* but we should bear in mind he published four other columns during the invasion of Iraq – about the Dark Skies campaign (20 March 2003), a trip to Venice (27 March 2003), birds in the garden (3 April 2003) and choral singing (10 April 2003).

The *EDP* leader column during this period was fully behind the war effort (2003a), arguing that participating in anti-war protests 'when young British servicemen are not only fighting, but dying' was 'unseemly' (2003b). Archant's three other daily newspapers – the *Eastern Anglia Daily Times* (2003: 16), *Ipswich Evening Star* (2003a: 2) and *Norwich Evening News* (2003: 8) – all backed the war when it began, asking readers to support US and British troops. The then-Foreign Secretary summed up the *EDP*'s performance on the Iraq War in April 2003, when he noted (*Evening Star* 2003b): 'The regional press is performing with distinction.' Let's be clear about what is at stake. Opinion polls consistently found the majority of the British public were opposed to the Iraq War as it was fought – without UN authorisation (Ahmed, Beaumont & Paton Walsh 2002; BBC News 2003; Ipsos MORI 2003). However, 100 per cent of Archant's daily newspapers in Norfolk and Suffolk supported the illegal invasion that has led to around 500,000 Iraqi dead, according to a recent peer-reviewed study (Vergano 2013).

Contrary to the argument that the *EDP*'s editorial line reflects the politics of the paper's readers, on Iraq and other major foreign policy issues such as Afghanistan, where the majority of the public have long been opposed to the British occupation (Bingham 2008; Channel 4 News 2009), the *EDP*'s editorial position has been *opposed* to public opinion. What explains this dangerous democratic deficit? Former *EDP* Political Editor, Chris Fisher:

The editorial line taken in the build-up to the Iraq War in 2002-03 ... was essentially the

product of lengthy discussion between the then editor [Peter Franzen] and me. There was some internal dissent on that one, but the view taken by the editor and me stood.

It certainly would not have done any harm that the Chairman of Archant, Richard Jewson, was also Lord-Lieutenant for Norfolk, whose duties include liaising 'with local units of the Royal Navy, Royal Marines, Army, Royal Air Force and their associated Cadet Forces', according to the official website (Norfolk County Council 2014). However, unwittingly Fisher's explanation seems to back up Herman and Chomsky's argument that a central reason for the media's subservience to power is the selection of right-thinking individuals. Overt control is not needed when the people you have hired choose to follow a pro-government position in the face of mountains of evidence and the majority of public opinion. George Orwell (1944) summed it up best: 'Circus dogs jump when the trainer cracks his whip, but the really well-trained dog is the one that turns his somersault when there is no whip.'

**'Some sort of miracle': The One World column**

There are, of course, exceptions to the general political line I have highlighted above. The *EDP* is, after all, a daily newspaper that requires a lot of copy from a relatively large staff. The ideological and commercial constraints are not a perfect system of control – critical reporting will occasionally get through, journalists will occasionally rebel. The *EDP*'s letters page provides an important and relatively free space to challenge the paper's coverage.

The story of the One World column is also important. In 2003, frustrated by the *EDP*'s coverage of the Iraq War and those who opposed it, a group of local activists made a written complaint to the Editor, Peter Franzen. Marguerite Finn, a local political activist and former contributor to the One World column, explains:

There was a big protest movement against the Iraq War which never got into print [in the *EDP*] at all. It was also down to Chris Fisher who said in one of his columns something about [peace activists being] 'Saddam lovers'. At that point that was too much for us. We demanded to see the editor ... Funnily enough he agreed to see us. And he had Chris Fisher with him.

At the meeting the activists were offered a weekly column in the paper. 'We retired to a

pub and were absolutely flabbergasted that we managed to get a column,' remembers Finn. 'I still think back on that meeting as some sort of miracle.' Established in May 2004, the column, published every Saturday, focused on international development, social justice, globalisation, peacemaking, human rights, international relations and the environment (One World nd). The column had a rotating set of columnists, including the author of this article in 2004. In August 2010, the column was closed by the *EDP*.

Published 320 times, the column was a good example of activist pressure leading to real change – in this case winning a weekly column that pushed an unapologetically progressive agenda to a wide audience. However, it is important to note there were definite red lines that could not be crossed. In 2004, I submitted an article that summarised some of the war crimes perpetrated by British armed forces in recent history ending with the death of the Iraqi Baha Mousa in British custody in 2003. The *EDP* refused to publish this column. The News Editor told me it had been rejected for two reasons: First, the column was too contentious and second they felt it was not appropriate to publish the column in a week when two British soldiers had died in Iraq.<sup>5</sup> The *EDP* rejected another column I submitted later that year, this time about the November 2004 US attack on the city of Fallujah in Iraq. The Deputy Editor told me it was 'outwardly political', 'hectoring' and 'narrow in its view'.<sup>6</sup> Criticism of the US-UK invasion and occupation of Iraq certainly appeared in the column but there were red lines when it came to suggesting, accurately, that the US and UK forces were responsible for thousands of civilian deaths and were likely committing war crimes.

**'The Norfolk mafia is quite small': Conclusion**

As I have shown, far from being the objective and non-political newspaper of the senior managements' and editors' fantasies, the *EDP*'s editorial line and broader politics are conservative – staunchly pro-monarchy, strongly supportive of UK foreign wars of choice and a big backer of business interests in the region. These political stances mean the paper has effectively censored criticism of the monarchy, stood in opposition to public opinion on the UK's recent wars, downplayed the level of local peace and anti-war activism and dismissed the long-term environmental case against business being given a free hand in the region.

Davies's corporate-led churnalism certainly provides a useful insight into the *EDP's* politics and reporting. However, the evidence presented here strongly suggests that the *EDP's* ownership and, to a lesser extent, its reliance on advertising are key reasons for the *EDP's* political stances. The *EDP's* board and major shareholders are key figures in Norfolk's ruling elite, with interlinked interests in the world of politics, business, the military and monarchy. For example, as well as being the Chairman of Archant and the Lord-Lieutenant for Norfolk, Richard Jewson has held the following positions in recent years (Bloomberg Businessweek 2014): Pro-Chancellor of the University of East Anglia; Chairman of Savills, the estate agents; the Deputy Chairman of Anglian Water Services; Chairman of East Port Great Yarmouth; Chairman of Octagon Healthcare, Non-Executive Chairman of PFI Infrastructure, Trustee of the TEN Group, which runs a number of academies in Norfolk, and Managing Director of Jewson, the building material company. 'Certainly, there is normally an interesting "coincidence" between the *EDP's* editorial line and such interests,' the senior Norfolk-based political figure told me. Former Norwich North MP Ian Gibson agrees, telling me the *EDP* is 'an establishment newspaper'. He quipped that 'the Norfolk Mafia is quite small' noting that people such as the leaders of the academies and free school movement in Norfolk, Graham Dacre and Rachel DeSouza, receive positive coverage in the *EDP*:

There is a gang of people like that who I'm quite sure at a dinner party level and through the Lord-Lieutenant are the movers and shakers in Norfolk. And I think I know most of them. You see how they get on and how they support each other. And the editors of the press are very much part of that, there is no doubt about it.

All this is of little surprise to *Guardian* columnist George Monbiot (2009): 'Local papers defend the powerful because the powerful own and fund them.' This inconvenient truth raises profound questions about the nature of the press and democracy in Norfolk. Is it right that the *EDP's* editorial line on many issues seems to be more in line with the members of the elite who manage and own the paper than the paper's readers? Is it healthy for democracy that a small number of extremely wealthy people have the controlling stake in the company that owns nearly all the newspapers in the region? Would stories that show these people in a bad light be given a fair hearing at the *EDP*?

Archant's monopoly in the region also has a worrying influence on dissent. From researching and writing this article, I found that many people were reluctant to speak out publicly against the *EDP*. Although rarely explicitly stated, it was clear they were concerned about the negative effect this might have on themselves or the organisations they represent. It would be political suicide, would it not, for a local politician to criticise the *EDP* publicly, when the *EDP* is the main source of information for people about local politics? Speaking to me about a meeting he once had with the then Editor of the *EDP* Peter Franzen and other Norfolk MPs, Gibson explained that the other MPs were loath to criticise the *EDP* as 'they saw the newspaper as the forum for their views to be taken seriously'.

As the saying goes, the first step in solving a problem is realising there is a problem. Hopefully this article has highlighted some of the problems that the *EDP's* corporate ownership and politics hold for progressives in Norfolk. US academic Robert McChesney argues (1997: 71): 'So long as the media are in corporate hands, the task of social change will be vastly more difficult, if not impossible.' The second step in solving a problem is action – whether that be directly challenging the *EDP* journalists about the paper's conservative politics or setting up alternative media outlets that critique the mainstream media and cover all the news the *EDP* ignores.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Two of the people I interviewed, for reasons I explore in the conclusion, asked for their testimony to be anonymised

<sup>2</sup> Email to author, 17 December 2003

<sup>3</sup> Email to author, 28 November 2013

<sup>4</sup> Although the *EDP* celebrated the British victory in the Falklands, it should be noted the *EDP* consistently raised critical questions about Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's actions throughout the conflict

<sup>5</sup> Notes taken by author during phone call between author and the News Editor at the *EDP*, 2004

<sup>6</sup> Notes taken by author during phone call between author and the Deputy Editor at the *EDP*, 2004

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Fisher, Chris (2012) Former Political Editor, *Eastern Daily Press*, 21 November, email interview

Gibson, Ian (2013) Former MP for Norwich North, 24 December

Greenaway, John (2012) Emeritus Professor of Politics, University of East Anglia, 21 November, email interview

Hurst, Ken (2012) Former Business Editor and latterly weekly columnist, *Eastern Daily Press*, 8 November, email interview

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