Initial Call for Papers

Liberalism Inc. - 200 years of the Guardian

Keynote speakers: Priya Gopal (author of Insurgent Empire: Anticolonial Resistance and British Dissent) and Alan Rusbridger (author of Breaking News and former editor-in-chief of the Guardian)

In May 2021, the Guardian turns 200. From its inception in Manchester in 1821 as a response to the murder of ordinary people by soldiers in the 1819 Peterloo Massacre to its historic identification with centre-left politics, the Guardian has long been a key institution in the definition and development of liberalism. The stereotype of the ‘Guardianista’, an environmentally conscious, Labour-voting, progressively minded public sector worker remains part of the popular mythology of British press history.

Yet the title has a complex lineage.

The Guardian advocated the abolition of slavery in the US, criticised the Boer War, backed women’s suffrage and supported the Republican cause in the Spanish civil war; it has published some of the most celebrated examples of investigative journalism – from the breaking of the phone hacking scandal to Edward Snowden’s revelations of US and UK surveillance programmes.

Yet it owes its existence to a cotton merchant determined to head off more radical ideas at the start of the Industrial Revolution; it opposed direct action by the suffragette movement; has at various times called for a vote for the Conservatives, Social Democrats and Liberal Democrats; supported the First Gulf War and the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia; and has been accused more recently of consistently denigrating Jeremy Corbyn’s leadership of the Labour Party. It has both fiercely defended the need for fearless, independent journalism and handed over documents and hard drives to the authorities; it has carved out a niche for itself in the UK press market as a progressive voice but has also consistently diminished more radical projects to the left.

Its business model is equally distinctive. It has been owned by the Scott Trust since 1936 and has been partially protected from the proprietorial interference that its counterparts have always faced; it has led the way in innovative design and formats and it now champions a membership model with some one million people signed up to the scheme.
Its forthcoming anniversary provides an opportunity for academics, researchers, historians and journalists to assess the contribution of the Guardian to British politics, society and culture. We are looking for a range of contributions from more theoretical reflections on its foundational principles to empirical assessments of specific features of its coverage. In particular, we are looking for papers on:

- Historical and theoretical accounts of liberalism
- Issues of balance, bias and sourcing in Guardian journalism
- Press power, partisanship and propaganda
- The history of the Guardian with an emphasis on its founding in 1821
- Its party political affiliations and election endorsements
- Its reporting of women’s liberation and gender issues
- Its coverage of race and empire
- Foreign reporting with a particular interest in its coverage of UK military interventions
- Its reporting of Israel and Palestine
- Its business model: critiques of Trust ownership, Guardian membership and international expansion
- Its commitment to investigative journalism
- Newsroom culture and internal democracy
- The shift from ‘hard news’ to comment and opinion
- Philanthropic funding and branded content
- The Guardian, surveillance and national security

Selected papers will be invited to submit to an edited collection to be published in 2021 ahead of the Guardian’s anniversary.

The conference is organised by the Goldsmiths Leverhulme Media Research Centre and will be held in the Professor Stuart Hall building at Goldsmiths, University of London in New Cross, South East London on Saturday 9 May 2020.

Please send your abstract of no more than 300 words to goldsmithsleverhulmecentre@gmail.com.

We will also consider panel proposals. Deadline: 30 September 2019.

For more information, contact the conference organisers Des Freedman and Becky Gardiner.