**Which agenda is really at play?**

“Is there another agenda at play?” This was the question posed by Russell Brand, in response to the sexual assault claims against him in September 2023. It’s often said that attack is the best form of defence, and this was Russell Brand’s tactic when he was “exposed” on national TV and in the newspapers. Now it’s up to journalists to employ the same strategy when confronting his predictable accusations of media collusion. But the target of our attack shouldn’t be Brand himself – it should be politicians.

For the comedian and former Hollywood star, attacks on the media are nothing new. Whether interviewing Ed Miliband on his YouTube channel or facing the customary grilling by Jeremy Paxman on *Newsnight*, Brand successfully combined comedy with apparent credibility. He transferred his acquired taste witticisms and seemingly intellectual diatribes from the fringes to mainstream television - and then back again to social media. Except for Brand on social media, a following of 6.7 million people across various platforms meant his polemics carried far more weight than being on stage at the Edinburgh Fringe. Over the years, his whining about media being in the pockets of politicians or big business have resonated with a wide – in fact, worldwide – audience.

Brand’s most recent public utterings have been to defend himself against the allegations first broadcast by Channel 4 *Dispatches*, following their year-long investigation alongside journalists from *The Times* and *The* *Sunday Times*. The claims against him included accusations of historical rape, sexual assault and controlling and emotionally abusive behaviour. The programme, *Russell Brand: In Plain Sight,* showed archive clips of comedy performances in which Brand was seen bragging about his misogyny, alongside testimonies from five alleged victims, four of whom asked to remain anonymous. *Dispatches* also gave airtime to Brand’s media conspiracies. “The media shape our reality to benefit them and their corporate partners,” he was seen saying in an archive clip. Let’s paraphrase. Everything is the media’s fault. Isn’t it always?

One week after being asked to respond to the allegations against him by journalists from *Dispatches*, *The Times* and *The Sunday Times*, and on the eve of the *Dispatches* broadcast, Brand’s thought-provoking question about a hidden agenda lurking in the shadows was posed in a video blog on his YouTube channel. Denying the allegations, he said he had historically been “very, very promiscuous” but his relationships were “absolutely, always consensual”, claiming: “I was always transparent about that then, almost too transparent.” Adding that he actually “refuted” (*note to journalism students: see the meaning of this word*) the allegations against him, Brand went on to say: “To see that transparency metastasised into something criminal, that I absolutely deny, makes me question: ‘Is there another agenda at play’?” Referring specifically to the investigative journalism into his behaviour, Brand told his followers that there were witnesses whose testimonies contradicted the “narratives constructed” by “two mainstream media outlets” in an “apparently co-ordinated attack”. There we go again. It’s the media wot done it. Not me.

A new narrative? Not for Brand. Only three months earlier, he’d told *Jacobin* that “elite establishment interests… broadly coalesce around control of media, financial interests, and the state”. Only this time, his coruscating attacks on the media came at a time when he was in a corner. The journalistic investigation into Brand’s behaviour came with immediate consequences, quite apart from the subsequent police investigation. These included being released by his agent and the mothballing of a book publishing project. His content was also removed from the BBC and Channel 4’s streaming platforms, while YouTube demonetised his channel. This very public condemnation of a man who had the right of innocence until being proved guilty (or even charged) did nothing to endear journalists to his followers on social media. “These evil elites will destroy anyone who speaks the truth,” said one keyboard correspondent responding to Brand’s YouTube denials. “Those of us who are awake know how the elites work,” wrote another follower, adding: “Keep up your work Russell, we are with you.” There were hundreds more examples.

The allegations of Brand being put on trial by TV weren’t limited to the voices of those of his devotees who claim to be voiceless. Supporting Brand’s media conspiracy claims, the world’s second richest man Elon Musk posted on his X platform: “Of course. They don’t like competition.” And *Daily Mail* columnist Sarah Vine, while describing the allegations against Brand as shocking, claimed: “Even a toerag like him should surely be given a fair hearing.” There was also controversial support from a presenter on GB News. These positions could have come straight from the Russell Brand playbook. Or perhaps even Peter Oborne’s. The former political commentator resigned from the *Daily Telegraph* in 2015, claiming his story on the HSBC tax evasion scandal was blocked because of a conflict between the paper’s editorial and commercial interests. Journalists in bed with big business? Three years before that, right here in *British Journalism Review*, Oborne claimed that it was politicians who the press shared a bed with. “British journalists will almost always favour the rich, powerful and glamorous over the poor, weak and unfashionable,” he wrote in Volume 23, Issue 3, because us journalists are a “core part of the governing machine”.

This was an interpretation of Herman and Chomsky’s propaganda model, in which politicians subject journalists to “flak” – a sort of pressure which can take many forms, including letters consisting of complaints or threats. In one sense, Oborne may be right about the press having political bedfellows, when we assess the punitive actions of Channel 4, the BBC and YouTube following the *Dispatches* programme. They were among the leading news providers and major social media companies asked to explain their positions regarding Russell Brand when contacted by the chair of the Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee, Dame Caroline Dinenage. Denying political influence, the BBC said its subsequent decision to remove Brand’s content from its streaming services was “considered”. At the same time, its director general attempted to reassure the Gosport MP, a former cabinet minister, that the Corporation had developed a very different editorial and cultural environment in the 15 years since Brand last appeared on its platforms.

And lo, the BBC and others added fuel to the fire burning within Brand’s argument. The politician asked, the press succumbed. We must be part of a collusive elite after all? Media conspiracy theories like Brand’s represent threats to journalistic credibility. To uphold that credibility, it is vital that the press is seen to protect its editorial independence in the wake of political interference. As the journalism scholar Tony Harcup claims, dissatisfaction with established or “mainstream” media organisations only drives people towards alternative forms of journalism (such as Brand’s). So let’s not give them that easy route to it. Let’s stand up to the politicians. That’s far more important than standing up to a marginalised comedian.

A more robust approach was taken by the Canadian video hosting platform Rumble, as well as GB News. Dame Caroline wrote to Rumble to ask if they’d follow YouTube by demonetising Brand’s content. Rumble described her letter as “extremely disturbing” and “inappropriate”, claiming it was “dangerous” for the UK Parliament to ask them to join a “cancel culture mob”. There was no public response from X, when the letter they received asked for confirmation that Brand made money from the platform and to clarify what role Elon Musk might have played in his status on the site. But GB News made a strident defence of its editorial decision-making in its response to Dinenage’s letter. Chief executive Angelos Frangopoulos defended the station’s record on impartiality and free speech. He also responded to the MP’s intervention about a presenter’s support for Brand’s media conspiracies, saying the channel fully complied with Ofcom regulations. Perhaps fighting fire with fire against those who claimed Brand had been subjected to “trial by TV”, he also asserted that his channel had no place to pre-judge a potential criminal trial. The next day, there were claims in the *London Post* that Dame Caroline’s correspondence did not come with unanimous support from the select committee she chairs, leading to a call for her resignation (admittedly from a solitary UKIP MEP candidate). More significantly though, it was a somewhat overlooked story on the Russell Brand fallout which questioned political influence on the media.

The *Dispatches* programme was an example of robust, verified and legally sound journalism, as opposed to widespread unsourced and often ill-informed comment on social media. *Sunday Times* media editor Rosamund Urwin, speaking on Times Radio, described it as the result of thorough investigative reporting, distinct from some sensationalist tabloid follow-ups. “We are obliged to not sensationalise these stories and I am very frustrated that one of our rival papers this morning has put a headline on Alice’s story that is frankly disgusting,” she said, referring to an interpretation of the account of one of the alleged victims. “I really think we should be aware as an industry that there are duties that we are bound by. We have a regulator for a reason. Reporting around sexual offences has to be incredibly carefully and delicately done…” In other words, far from the *Dispatches* broadcast constituting “trial by TV”, it was the court of social media – and the content of some tabloid follow-ups - which really put Brand in the dock, or freed him from it.

Protecting editorial independence from political influence is key if established news organisations are to retain credibility in attempts to reject media conspiracy theories. Brand and many among his 6.7 million YouTube followers strengthened their commitment to these accusations of collusion in the wake of the *Dispatches* allegations. There aren’t many instances where I would favour the approach of GB News over the BBC. But here is one. The BBC plays a unique role in the UK’s media ecology and is not representative of all forms of traditional broadcast news media or online platforms. As our public broadcaster, it is also familiar with historic criticisms from governments from both sides of the political spectrum. Perhaps the pressure it faced during the Covid pandemic, for instance the guidance from No. 10 that it should resist the word “lockdown” in news broadcasts, established a new dynamic in its relationship with government. However, it is now more incumbent than ever that it plays a leading role in fighting direct political intervention, standing alongside the rest of the media industry which is already facing historic high levels of regulation. It is less “trial by TV” and more being asked to act as “judge and jury” if news organisations allow their commercial arrangements or editorial stances on individuals to be politically influenced before court proceedings have even taken place. Forget Brand and his “brand” of media conspiracies, the best way to defend against them is top be seen to disprove them. It is the threat of political meddling which represents the real enemy for a democratic media built on the foundations of a free press. Resisting that would have served as a rebuttal of those exact same conspiracies, propagated by Brand and others, that news organisations are part of a collusive elite with political leaders. What was it you said, Russell? Is there another agenda at play? I think there is. And it’s time we stood up to those in the corridors of power.

*This is an edited version of an academic paper by the writer.* ***Neil Roberts****is a Senior Lecturer in Journalism at the University of Derby. In a 25-year career, Neil worked as crime reporter for the Liverpool Echo, and as a reporter for the News of the World and Royal Gazette in Bermuda. He spent the majority of his career in television news and sport as a producer and programme editor at the BBC and ITN, and as an executive producer at IMG Media.*