



Live From Downing Street

Nick Robinson

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The intriguing inside story of the relationship between politics and the TV media.

Media coverage of politics has never been more immediate, more intense, or more personal. Last year saw governments collapse across the Middle East, in events documented on Twitter and You Tube hours before the mainstream media started their coverage. The phone hacking scandal placed unprecedented scrutiny on journalistic practices, with the Prime Minister calling for the relationship between politicians and the media to be 'reset'. We have seen the UK's first televised Prime Ministerial debate, the BBC relax restrictions on political broadcasts, and David Cameron forced to publish a full list of his contacts with the media. The focus of politics has shifted firmly from the street corner, to the box in the corner and elsewhere.

In *Live From Downing Street*, the BBC's Political Editor, Nick Robinson, tells the inside story of the 'troubled marriage' which has forced politicians and broadcasters to live together, rarely in harmony, for over 70 years. With unprecedented access and insight he reveals how the key players, past and present, handle the portrayal of their role in the public eye with varying degrees of success. Coupled with an analysis of how the relationship between politics and instant broadcasting will develop further in the digital world, *Live From Downing Street* presents a fascinating and important story of politics and the media in our time.

Live From Downing Street Details

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From Reader Review Live From Downing Street for online ebook

Emily says

Not the easiest book to read - not because of Nick's writing style which I enjoyed but just the sheer amount of information contained in this book. However, worth the perseverance and I found I really enjoyed it. Nick is as likable as an author as he comes across on tv. I finished the book feeling far better informed about the relationship between media and politicians and the media, especially that of the BBC. It made me feel more for both sides and gave me a greater understanding of both politicians and reporters. It enhanced my love for Nick, which I wasn't sure was possible!

Stephen says

The premise of the book is excellent but falls down on two accounts for me. The first half of the book (the pre-Nick Robinson era) lacks any real insight other than what has been gathered from other sources.

The second half of the book benefits from insights "from inside". It is sporadic however and often fails to link back to its premise and purpose. It's as if Nick Robinson was caught between trying to write an insight into the relationship between politics and the media, and an autobiography. The halfway house doesn't quite work.

Tim says

A superb overview of Nick Robinson's personal and professional career, done with great humour throughout. I woke my wife one night laughing at the passage about his recording of an interview with Senator George Mitchell being interrupted by his toddlers. Also sadness about the loss of his two best friends when he was young. Also talks about the history of political coverage on television and radio. Fasinating stuff.

Ruth Slavid says

This isn't deep but it is interesting and enjoyable and, unless you are a real politics obsessive contains some fascinating nuggets of information, not least because he looks back on events with quotes from recently published memoirs.

He gives a great insight into the relationship between the broadcast media and politics, shows just what hard work a job like his is, and discusses the paradox that somebody so involved in the political world has to be without expressed opinions.

Recommended.

Dylan says

This is not a memoir. Nick Robinson, a fine journalist and one of the few truly insightful political commentators, has written a wonderful history of British current affairs broadcasting. Since the early days of radio there has always been a struggle between politicians and the broadcasters (the book is mainly about the BBC); a struggle for truth, control, power and influence. Some politicians understood it better than others and tried to manipulate the media for their own ends. Others remained confused, suspicious and distant. This is an entertaining social history that conveys the impact of the press on public opinion and policy makers. Some lovely snapshots of a bygone era (Stanley Baldwin pausing to light his pipe during a live radio broadcast, while Mrs Baldwin sat next to him, quietly knitting), the wonders of the World Service, and the dramatic doom laden periods of war, disaster, or turmoil. Raises interesting questions for the future and is an entertaining, humorous read. Interesting story told with style.

Josh says

There are two parts to this. The first is a history, telling of the advent of broadcast journalism and the massive effect it had on the UK's political landscape. Robinson describes the battles fought for the types of news coverage we enjoy today, and shows, with several examples, how politicians' careers could be made, or equally destroyed, by how well they understood their relationship with the media.

The second covers the New Labour years, and takes on a memoir-like tone, as Robinson uses his own experience as a political correspondent to further his analysis and criticism of the media/politics relationship.

Robinson ends with some speculation about the future of broadcast journalism in the internet age and a discussion about the real meaning of impartiality in news coverage.

It's very clear that Robinson is intensely passionate and knowledgeable about his subject, and this passion makes for a very well thought out and engaging read, even, I imagine, for someone without vast knowledge or interest in the political world.

It is especially thought-provoking in the final chapters, where Robinson suggests that Twitter is more likely to narrow – rather than broaden – one's thoughts and opinions, because people tend to follow only those with whom they already agree. An accurate observation, I think.

Leah says

Symbiotic relationship...

Nick Robinson, Political Editor for the BBC, has managed to do in print what he does so well on a daily basis on TV; communicate interestingly, informatively and enjoyably. He has divided this book into two parts - before and during his own involvement in reporting on politics.

The first part covers the history and growth of political journalism from its earliest days, showing that some of the tensions we see between present-day politicians and journalists have always existed since their symbiotic relationship began. He recounts the fight for journalists to have access to parliament, first as a presence in the press gallery, then the later development of the 'lobby' and finally the struggle to get MPs to agree to televised coverage of the House. Not surprisingly, a lot of his story is focused on the BBC, first as a

radio broadcasting organisation then moving into television. Well researched and presented, he shows how the famous BBC 'impartiality' came into being, and how it has been consistently called into question throughout the Beeb's history.

The second half mainly covers the Blair/Brown years. By this point, Robinson was covering politics himself and the book takes on a more personal, partly autobiographical tone. As he relates the story of the years of spin and the increasing conflict between media and politicians, he openly questions where the faults lay and while he places some of the blame on the politicians he doesn't shy away from criticism of journalists, including his BBC colleagues and himself. We are treated to a surprisingly sympathetic, revealing and almost intimate view of both Blair and Brown from this man who spent years following each around the globe. This, of course, was the period of the Iraq war, the global crash and, not least, two major inquiries into the relationship between media and politicians: Hutton and then Leveson, which had not yet reported at the time the book was written. His insights into the political background of all of these events are fascinating as he reflects on the role of the media in each.

In the afterword, Robinson discusses the possible future, focussing on whether impartiality will remain desirable or even possible in the Twitter/Facebook age. He suggests that there is a strengthening body of opinion that there may be a place in broadcasting for bias, much in the way that Fox TV has changed the face of broadcasting in the US. It is clear that his own bias, however, is to defend the principle of impartiality - without dismissing the problems that are inherent within the current system, he clearly believes it is still better than the alternative.

In summary, an interesting and thought-provoking book, well and approachably written and impressively objective on the whole. It is brave for a working journalist to discuss so openly the strengths and weaknesses of his profession and himself - I felt that, as he wrote, Robinson was critically reconsidering and reassessing his own past performance and I will be intrigued to see if his future reporting is influenced by what seemed, at times, as if he were undergoing a reflective learning experience. Highly recommended.

Patrick Garvey says

I expected this book to be another account of "What it's like to be a political journalist" like the other Nick Robinson book I read. However, it's much more. It traces the story of British political journalism from when politicians wanted to ban all talk of what happened in the Commons at all (the reporting of debates in the press being a criminal offence), through their resistance to radio and then television cameras, right up to the TV debates of the 2010 election and finishes with an ongoing Leveson enquiry. The book particularly shines in the later stages when Robinson becomes an active participant in the events.

However, this is more than a history book, as it sinks its teeth into much bigger questions: how can the media hold politicians to account without being more powerful than our democratically elected representatives, and is impartiality possible in reporting, or would we be better to simply allow and acknowledge bias in reporting. While Robinson is clearly in favour of broadcasters trying to remain impartial in their news, he does acknowledge how difficult it is (at one point describing it as like marital bliss, impossible to achieve entirely, but something worth striving for, and when you get it wrong, to apologise and try again harder). He also is not afraid to criticise the modern media, and even talks about some of his own previous work less than flatteringly.

My only criticism would be it is already a bit dated. Some of the things he talks about as vague future

possibilities such as social media starting to play a larger and larger role, and the ease of blogging making anyone who wants to be able to write reports, are coming to pass right now.

Very good, recommended to anyone with an interest in British politics.

Simon Howard says

Nick Robinson's book is a thoroughly enjoyable romp through the history of the relationship between politicians and the media, from the very beginnings of Parliament to the present day. It's part historical and part autobiographical, with the latter part in particular including lots of amusing anecdotes about Robinson's time as a political journalist. Some of these genuinely made me laugh out loud. It also has a lengthy "last word", in which Robinson muses on the future of political journalism, and the opportunities and threats offered by introducing to the UK biased broadcasting in the mould of Fox News.

He has an easy writing style making this an easy relaxed read. He sometimes has a slightly peculiar reliance on turns of phrase which fail to accurately communicate what he means to say: for example, there's a passage where he introduces Gordon Brown's disastrous flirtations with YouTube by saying that politicians have always been keen to embrace technology to communicate their message - something which he's spent most of the first two-thirds of the book disproving.

He gives a very eloquent account of the effect of the plurality of media in the broadest sense meaning that people surround themselves with messages that support their world viewpoint, and the effect this in turn has on perceptions of bias at the BBC. This is something I've been banging on about on Twitter for ages, in a far less coherent manner, and it was interesting to see that the same thoughts have occurred to that organisation's Political Editor. He also gives an interesting discussion of the nature of bias and impartiality, which I very much enjoyed.

There isn't an awful lot of new stuff in this book. I think many people who follow politics in detail are probably aware of the history of the BBC and the historic developments in the relationship between journalists and the press. But Robinson presents all of this with such a clear narrative and in such a clear way that I still found myself very engaged with the content even when he was describing events I knew well.

The lengthy discussion of recent events and media figures - phone hacking being perhaps the most notable example - will probably make this book date quite quickly. Indeed, the mentions of Leveson "whose report has not been published at the time of writing" already make it feel a little behind the times, particularly since Leveson's report covers much of the same ground discussed by Robinson.

Either way, this is well worth a read, and comes highly recommended.

Dean Irwin says

As a history student it was with incredibly low expectations that I picked up Nick Robinson's book - political correspondents rarely make good historians. Yet Robinson did not seek to be a historian, but rather sought to trace the path that his job had taken over several centuries. As a result of this, a truly spectacular result because Robinson's aim provides his text with a sort of genuine integrity that is so often absent from modern

writing. It was also nice to discover that the man that everybody see's (or rather saw) on the BBC is also a very competent writer.

Andrew says

She so distrusted the BBC, Margaret Thatcher on becoming Prime Minister in 1979 waited seventy-five days to give her first TV interview to ITV. The nation's 2nd channel's delay was due to an industrial dispute in commercial broadcasting. There was a sixteen year gap between the first US presidential debate in 1960, Nixon/Kennedy, and the second in '76 between Carter and Ford. Some of the proposed names for the first incarnation of the Today programme in 1957 were Listen While You Dress and Background To Shaving. 'I Spy Strangers' cried out in the House Of Commons by an MP, a 18th Century practise, will still clear the press gallery of journalists.

This book is not a long list of strange facts about political coverage, but in fact an examination of how the media has been interacting and changing politics throughout the centuries. It is written in an easy, flowing style that makes this whole history very enjoyable to read.

Part 1 of the book begins in the 17th Century, when reporting anything an MP said was illegal, and tells the story of the interplay between politicians and the media up until the mid-1990s, when Major was in trouble with his backbenchers and Nick Robinson started to work for BBC News. Part 2 of the book continues the same the story but from the point of view of a political correspondent, then political editor of both BBC and ITV. This second half includes a fascinating account of the strain between Blair's government and the BBC over the Iraq war and the death of David Kelly.

This edition also seems bang very current and indeed has been updated, to cover the TV election debate, the coalition government and the very beginning of Ukip's increased popularity.

This is a great, informative, entertaining read for anyone with a keen interest in the workings of the media and politics.

Fred Wharton says

Robinson's insider account of life as a BBC political correspondent urges a necessary tension between politicians - primarily prime ministers - and the press and broadcast media. It's packed with detail going back over decades of administrations (most strongly on the Tony Blair era), and sets out significant differences between US and UK media situations, most importantly that in the UK there could be no equivalent of Fox, because in the UK there's a legal imperative to present balanced coverage, or suffer the consequences which can involve having one's license revoked. (Fox, he depicts as presenting a parallel universe, an "alternative reality"). Unfortunately, the book has been overtaken by recent events - notably the scandals involving the Murdoch press, phone-hacking and the much-too-cozy, even flirtatious relationship between characters like Rebekah Brooks and Prime Minister David Cameron - the very antithesis of a "necessary tension"; and also by the BBC's cover-up of the Jimmy Savile sex-abuse horrors, where the BBC clearly betrayed its own mandate of impartiality and pursuit of the truth. Still, a pretty good 400-page transatlantic-flight read.

Hubert Han says

The first half of the book, on the history of the relationship between politics and TV/radio broadcasting, is interesting. It does not pretend to be remotely analytical or academic but is nevertheless illuminating (I suspect Robinson would be proud of this, having spent some pages justifying the need for the media and politicians to speak 'to the people' rather than 'to the corridors of power').

The second half is somewhat disappointing and at times a limp rehash of some of the bigger news controversies of the Noughties. It reads more like a curated diary than an 'inside story' - but perhaps goes to show the extent to which there was/is no media 'inside story' independent of politics, and the concomitant and irreversible intertwining of politics and the media today.

James says

A great book, Nick writes in a fun and interesting way about the whole history of political journalism in the UK. He is incredibly vague on current political figures - because he has to work with them and needs good relationships with all to do so - and therefore anyone reading this in the hope of learning shocking information about current politics will be disappointed. Overall I would give it 4/5 stars purely as the big secrets can't be revealed. Maybe Nick should have waited twenty years or so and then the book could have been hugely surprising and perhaps a tad more interesting, although it cannot be described as boring!

Hasan says

Nick Robinson sheds light on the growing complex relationship between politicians and in particular the media. He speaks about his own challenges and issues being a political reporter, using his own anecdotes and examples of how he may have riled certain Prime Minister's or felt he should have asked more serious questions on the War in Iraq.

Stanley Baldwin as PM understood the power of the wireless, while Churchill felt the BBC should be a State mouthpiece, yet it was only the insistence of the first DG of the BBC, Lord Reith's defiance of impartiality which took BBC to the course it has taken since 1924. Robinson shows the growing role of media from informing, inquisitive questioning and the outbreak of a 24 hour news cycle and how various Prime Minister's have coped, adapted and loathed.

Robinson finishes his historical journey but also informative narrative on bias and the media. Quite rightly he argues the need for impartiality for major broadcast media, especially as citizen journalism brings opinions to the front. The book highlights the rocky relationship between media and politicians, but signifies that they both need each other. The media of course have to hold those in power to account, however in recent year public trust has eroded due to the rise of lobby groups, politicians cozying up to media moguls and phone hacking. Robinson sheds light on those complex issues, but highlights what he feels the role of the media is vis-a-vis politicians.

I recommend this book to any student of journalism, political communications and politics.

