

SPECIAL EDITION

# WETHERSPOONNEWS

# DOES TRUTH MATTER?

Many untrue statements were made about  
Wetherspoon during the pandemic

Wetherspoon News sets  
the record straight

We publish apologies and/or corrections from:

Daily Express

Daily Mail

Daily Mirror

Daily Star

Sky News

The Daily Telegraph

The Guardian

The Independent

The Times

Forbes

..among others...

# HOW WETHERSPOON BECAME A JAMES BOND VILLAIN

**..based on false information**

*“Now maybe you’re right, maybe you’re wrong,  
But I ain’t gonna argue with you no more,  
I’ve done it for too long...”*

**Cat Stevens**

**Wetherspoon, which first opened for business in 1979, was a pretty unfashionable, albeit reasonably successful, pub company for several decades, until a few years before the pandemic.**

Two small lightning bolts seemed to contribute to a transformation of popular opinion, at least among the media classes.

A writer called Kit Caless published a book featuring some of the individually designed Wetherspoon carpets, which struck a chord in the public’s consciousness and became a minor hit.

Then, local authorities, bless them, published a ‘scores on the doors’ league table, showing that Wetherspoon, to the surprise of the metropolitan elite, along with Pret à Manger, topped the cleanliness charts for pub and restaurant companies.

Positive, even adulatory, press articles became commonplace – and the Wetherspoon name adorned the pages of the press, even in far-away countries like America, Australia and Japan.

Trouble, so perceptive Wetherspoon followers instinctively felt, could not be far away, especially in the light of my own views on the divisive issue of Brexit.

And so it came to pass.

Following the first lockdown in March 2020, comments from an internal staff video, designed to reassure, were taken out of context and distorted outrageously.

The newly fashionable Wetherspoon rapidly became a James Bond villain.

In the febrile atmosphere of the first lockdown last year, no prisoners were taken.

Adopting the approach of Muhammad Ali’s tactics in the famous ‘Rumble in the Jungle’, Wetherspoon waited for the furore to subside, then requested that the media organisations rectify their misrepresentations.

Never, in the history of business, we surmise, has a single organisation sought, and obtained, so many apologies and corrections from so many iconic media organisations.

Daily Express, Daily Mail, Daily Mirror, Daily Star, Sky News, The Daily Telegraph, The Guardian, The Independent, The Times and even America’s prestigious Forbes magazine have all, sometimes grudgingly, had to admit that they got it wrong.

C’est la vie, as the Chuck Berry song goes.

No hard feelings, folks.

Yes, some people were horrid to us, but we bear no grudges.

Newspapers play a vital role in shining a light on power and on the murkier goings-on in the world – and journalists work incredibly hard in an Internet-ravaged industry.

Years ago, I berated a stockbroker who criticised Wetherspoon in a note to his clients.

“Remember, Tim,” he said, “you’ve got your job to do and I’ve got mine.”

Fair comment, I thought, I’ll settle for that – and, in the case of media misrepresentations of the last 18 months, we’ll settle for publishing the extensive list of corrections and apologies which you can read on the following pages.

**Tim Martin**  
Chairman

THE  TIMES

12 February 2021

30 April, 11 June, 10 July 2020

The Times agreed to print a correction (see opposite), following an article dated 12 November 2020.

The Times agreed to remove the suggestion that Wetherspoon's chairman, Tim Martin, said to employees "go work at Tesco," which was completely untrue.

The correction appeared in the The Times on 12 February 2021.

“**Correction:** On November 12, we reported on comments by Tim Martin, of JD Wetherspoon, and said 'Go work at Tesco' was his employee-friendly cry" (Bitter Truth, Nov 12).

In fact Mr Martin told employees that supermarkets needed staff in the pandemic.

Staff offered that work could take it and that they would be given priority at JD Wetherspoon should they return.

We are happy to make that clear.”



INDEPENDENT

Three articles by the Independent (dated 30 April, 11 June and 10 July) and one Indy 100 article dated 24 June 2020 have been amended following complaints from JD Wetherspoon:

All four articles were amended to recognise that at no point did Mr Martin tell employees that Wetherspoon would not continue to pay them.

The publications accepted the fact that all staff were paid by the company up until the point pubs closed, following which all staff received furlough pay.

In addition, all four articles were amended to clarify that Mr Martin did not direct staff that they "should work at Tesco instead". The publications acknowledged that their reporting on this point was inaccurate and that Mr Martin had, in fact, expressed that he 'understood' if employees were offered a job in a supermarket and wished to take it up.

In addition to the above inaccuracies, the Indy 100 article dated 24 June 2020 also incorrectly reported Mr Martin as saying, after the government ordered lockdown, that "our aim is for pubs to open for the duration of lockdown".

The Indy 100 published a correction and an apology to make it clear that Mr Martin's comments in relation to pubs remaining open were made on 20 March 2020 - before the Government mandated lockdown.

When the government ordered the closure of pubs later that day, JD Wetherspoon immediately complied with the direction and closed its pubs.

sky news

2 May 2020

Sky News inaccurately reported in its online article that:

"Mr Martin ... angrily [suggested] his 43,000 staff go to work for Tesco" and that he "threaten[ed] to withhold wages until compensation from the government arrived." It was also incorrectly reported that the company was "targeting a reopening date in June" and that the "the pub chain argued it should stay open during the coronavirus lockdown."

After Wetherspoon contacted Sky News to correct the inaccurate statements, it published the following correction on its website on 2 May 2020:

“**Correction:** This story has been updated to more accurately reflect previous comments by Tim Martin. We have removed our interpretation that Mr Martin "angrily" suggested employees seek jobs at Tesco and that his stated position amounted to a threat to withhold pay.”

DAILY Mirror

4 May 2020

In two articles dated 30 April 2020 and 4 May 2020, the Daily Mirror incorrectly said that Wetherspoon's chairman, Tim Martin, "sack[ed] his staff and [told] them to work for Tesco".

Following Wetherspoon's representations, the Daily Mirror printed the correction below:

“**Correction:** The article originally stated Mr Martin "prompted anger and eventually a U-turn on wages after suggesting staff should 'go and work in Tesco'". A video caption also stated Mr Martin "tells 40,000 staff to 'go to work at Tesco'".

We accept Mr Martin did not tell staff to work in Tesco or use the words "go and work in Tesco". Instead, he said if staff thought it was a good idea to take a supermarket job, "do it, I can completely understand it." We are happy to make this clear and apologise for the confusion.

JD Wetherspoon also dispute that there was a "U-turn on wages", because staff wages were paid on March 27 for hours worked up to March 23.

We have clarified the story to make clear there was an argument about furlough pay, not past wages, and that the firm confirmed on March 25 that staff would receive furlough pay from April 3 onwards.”

**A letter from The Times' legal advisers (8 April 2020) confirms that The Times withdraws its accusation that Wetherspoon would not pay staff for work done.**

“**Correction:** By way of goodwill, we are instructed that The Times will amend the online version of the Article as follows:

...employees, **telling them that they wouldn't get paid until the end of April for work they had done...**”

## Forbes

**US business magazine Forbes made a large number of mistakes in two articles about Wetherspoon.**

**Wetherspoon issued the press release below, which was published by the London Stock Exchange:**

**Wetherspoon's press release:**

7 May 2020 JD Wetherspoon plc (“the company”)

**Correction – Forbes:**

“ Articles published online by the business magazine Forbes, on 27 March and 3 May 2020, made a number of factually incorrect statements regarding the company.

It was alleged that the company told the “workforce that not only would they not be paid, but they can trot off to get a job in a supermarket”.

As regards pay, a company video, recorded on Sunday 22 March (transcript below, appendix 1), actually said, “all our endeavours are going to be on trying to make sure that you get your money and that the pubs reopen”.

An email, sent out with the video, said: “All hourly paid employees will be paid as normal on Friday 27 March for all hours worked up to, and including, Sunday 22 March 2020.”

Staff were paid on that Friday and have been paid on every Friday since.

The statement in Forbes that staff were told they could “trot off to get a job in a supermarket” is misleading. The video actually said: “If you're offered a job in a supermarket, many of you will want to do that.

“If you think it's a good idea, do it...I promise you, we'll give you first preference if you want to come back.”

Furloughed pub and restaurant staff are legally allowed to receive extra income if they work for supermarkets as well.

Forbes also said that the company “announced that... pubs WILL (Wetherspoon capitals) open sometime in June.” That is also incorrect.

In a stock exchange announcement on 29 April, Wetherspoon said: “The company's current assumptions are that its pubs will remain closed until late June 2020”.

The assumptions related to the modelling of two financial “scenarios”, for the benefit of investors, which necessitated an estimated opening date.

The date was only an estimate and the company made clear that it would only open when permitted by the government. ”

**As a result of the press release, Forbes changed the headline of its article and also printed the following at the end of the article:**

“**Correction:** In response to this article, JD Wetherspoon issued the following statement:

Mr Martin did not say his employees should get a job at a supermarket but accepted that if they were offered a job in a supermarket, he would understand if they wanted to take it.

He also did not threaten or indeed withhold any employee pay. Neither Mr Martin or Wetherspoon have refused to pay suppliers.

Wetherspoon has paid all supplier invoices due up to the end of March and the majority (83%) of suppliers have been paid in full.

At no point has Wetherspoon or Mr Martin said that it intends to or will open its pubs in June, in breach of lockdown restrictions.

No reopening date has been decided – and its pubs and hotels will only reopen when allowed to do so by the Government. ”

3 July 2020

The Daily Express agreed to print the following correction:

“**Correction:** A Daily Express article has been amended following a complaint from JD Wetherspoon.

A previous version of this article reported that Tim Martin told 43,000 employees that they would have to find work elsewhere or would not face getting paid until the

Government’s furlough scheme began, and that after public backlash, he U-turned his decision.

In fact, Tim Martin expressed that he ‘understood’ if employees were offered a job in a supermarket and wished to take it up.

We are happy to clarify this. ”

2 June 2021

The London Economic, an online publication, agreed to publish a correction covering a number of points. The publication retracted the suggestion that Wetherspoon was struggling to recruit staff. It also retracted the suggestion that Mr Martin said there would be “no further payments until the government furlough scheme was put in place” and that Mr Martin “suggested they [staff] get jobs at Tesco...”.

“**Correction:** This article is based on UK Daily Telegraph reporting that has since been found to be misleading.

The article may have given the impression that Wetherspoons in common with other companies in the hospitality sector was struggling to recruit staff.

In fact, Wetherspoons is not facing staff shortages or recruitment issues. We apologise for any confusion and are happy to correct the record.”

In addition, The London Economic deleted all of the following offending material from the article:

- 1) Employee pay: “Martin announced to staff at the time that he will pay them until the pubs last opened, but there would be no further payments until the Government furlough scheme was put in place”
- 2) Jobs at Tesco: “He suggested they [staff] get jobs at Tesco until the pandemic passes”
- 3) Non-payment of suppliers: “the pub chain said it did not intend to pay its suppliers until pubs reopen ”

30 April 2020

The Daily Star, in an article entitled ‘12 pints of lager and a packet of crisps, please!’, published in its newspaper and online on 30 April 2020, incorrectly stated that:

“JD Wetherspoon announced it will open its doors to drinkers again in a matter of weeks” and “the company said it wants to get back to serving booze “in or around June”. It added that the “suggestion could anger ministers.”

Wetherspoon contacted the Daily Star, which agreed to print the following correction:

“**Correction:** Our article ‘12 pints of lager & a packet of crisps, please!’ reported that JD Wetherspoon was ‘set to reopen in June’ and ‘will open its doors to drinkers again in a matter of weeks’.

JD Wetherspoon have asked us to clarify that at no point has Wetherspoon said that it intends to or will open its pubs and hotels in June, and that no reopening date has been decided.

We are happy to clarify this. ”

15 April 2020

The Loughborough Echo incorrectly reported in an article printed on 15 April 2020 that:

“Wetherspoon’s decision not to pay its 43,000 staff during the Coronavirus epidemic reveals a major gap in the government’s pandemic response”, according to Professor Alistair Milne, an “expert in financial economics”.

Wetherspoon contacted the Loughborough Echo to ask it to correct the untrue statement and it printed the following:

“**Correction:** Our article ‘Retrospective insurance could save firms’ 15 April, reported findings of Professor Alistair Milne, of Loughborough University’s school of Business and Economics, which included the statement that ‘Wetherspoons’ took a decision not to pay its 43,000 staff during the coronavirus crisis’.

We have since been contacted by Tim Martin, chairman of JD Wetherspoon, who has advised that employees were paid as normal on Friday 27 March, and have been paid on every Friday since.’ We are happy to clarify this. ”

JO STEVENS MP • RACHEL REEVES MP

# FAKE NEWS: MP URGED TO WITHDRAW FICTITIOUS CLAIM

Wetherspoon says an MP invented a story in which its chairman, Tim Martin, appeared before the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee (BEIS), whose chair is Rachel Reeves, now Shadow Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster (she has since left her position on the BEIS Committee).

As a result of the fictitious meeting in front of Ms Reeves' committee, the MP alleged that Wetherspoon changed its policy towards paying staff.

Jo Stevens, MP for Cardiff Central, said on Twitter (25 March): "After a session in front of @RachelReevesMP @CommonsBEIS Wetherspoons have u-turned on decision not to pay 43,000 staff while pubs are shut.

"Staff to be paid on April 3 and weekly after that. Good news, but people won't forget political pressure forced your hand Tim Martin"

Wetherspoon's chairman, Tim Martin, said: "These comments by Jo Stevens MP refer to a meeting which never happened.

"I was never asked to appear in front of Rachel Reeves' committee, as both Ms Stevens and Ms Reeves know.

"It's also completely untrue to say that Wetherspoon had decided not to pay 43,000 staff while pubs are shut.

"In a video recorded on Sunday 22 March, less than two days after the pubs shut, and three days before Ms Stevens' comments, I said: 'All our endeavours are going to be on trying to make sure you get your money and the pubs reopen.'

"An e-mail was sent with the video, saying: 'All employees will be paid as normal on Friday 27 March for all hours worked up to and including Sunday 22 March.'"

Mr Martin added: "Ms Stevens' comments also appear on the Bakers, Food and Allied Workers' Union's website and so will inevitably mislead the public.

"During the Leveson Inquiry, MPs made it abundantly clear that journalists have a duty to correct misleading statements.

"Ms Stevens and Ms Reeves also have a duty to uphold these principles themselves."

## Jo Stevens invents a fictitious meeting.

(Twitter 25 March 2020)

### Jo Stevens

@JoStevensLabour



After a session in front of @RachelReevesMP @CommonsBEIS Wetherspoons have u-turned on decision not to pay 43,000 staff while pubs are shut. Staff to be paid on April 3 and weekly after that. Good news, but people won't forget political pressure forced your hand Tim Martin

25/03/2020, 5:19 pm

## Rachel Reeves confuses 'furlough' with 'Govt loan' and fibs that Wetherspoon refused to 'lock down'.

(Twitter 24 March 2020)



### Rachel Reeves

@RachelReevesMP



Unacceptable that wetherspoons has refused to pay it's 40,000 employees until it receives its Govt loan - potentially in late April - after first refusing to lock down altogether. If bosses disregard employees' wellbeing then Govt should take tougher action to force compliance.

24/03/2020, 10:28 am



Rachel Reeves, MP



Jo Stevens, MP

PHOTO CREDIT: GETTY IMAGES

**Editor's note:** Tim Martin explains how he wrote to Rachel Reeves MP to complain about Jo Stevens MP's invention of a fictitious appearance in front of Ms Reeves' BEIS Committee and about other matters.

*Tim says:* "I wrote to Rachel Reeves MP, chair of the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee (BEIS) on 2 April 2020 and copied all committee members, to complain about Jo Stevens MP's invention of a fictitious appearance in front of the committee.

"I also complained that a letter sent by Ms Reeves, which was critical of Wetherspoon, had appeared on the BEIS website, but my reply had not.

"I did not receive a reply from Ms Reeves, but received one from another MP, a member of the committee, regarding an earlier letter from Ms Reeves."

The MP said: "the reference (by Rachel Reeves) to the 'committee's deep concerns' does not include me. To my knowledge, the letter was sent without consultation with the committee. Committee meetings had previously been cancelled in line with guidance for entry to the parliamentary estate..."

In conclusion, Rachel Reeves MP had written to Wetherspoon, expressing her 'committee's concerns', but without the knowledge of committee members.

Jo Stevens MP had stated to her followers, tagging or copying in Rachel Reeves, that I (Tim Martin) had appeared in front of the committee, which was untrue; my reply to Rachel Reeves' accusations was not visible on the BEIS website at the time – and I received no reply from Rachel Reeves to the letter below.

**Editor's note:** The correspondence between Rachel Reeves and Tim Martin is difficult to find on the BEIS section of the UK Parliament website, although a letter of 24 March from Rachel Reeves is more prominent.

Tim Martin's letter of 2 April, exhibited on this page, does not seem to be available at all on the website.

The correspondence between Rachel Reeves and Tim Martin is available on Wetherspoon's website ([www.jdwetherspoon.com/RachelReevesMP](http://www.jdwetherspoon.com/RachelReevesMP)).



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Rachel Reeves MP  
Chair of the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee,  
House of Commons  
London, SW1A 0AA

2 April 2020

Dear Rachel

CC: Members of the BEIS Committee

Further to our recent correspondence, you will be concerned to note that Jo Stevens MP told her Twitter followers on 25 March that:

"After a session in front of @RachelReevesMP @CommonsBEIS Wetherspoons have u-turned on decision not to pay 43,000 staff while pubs are shut. Staff to be paid on April 3 and weekly after that. Good news, but people won't forget political pressure forced your hand Tim Martin"

As you and your colleagues are aware, no such "session in front of" your committee ever took place – and Wetherspoon never said that it wouldn't pay its staff while its pubs were shut. Wetherspoon actually said the opposite to staff on Sunday 22 March, two days after pubs were closed:

"All our endeavours are going to be on trying to make sure you get your money and the pubs reopen."

You will also be concerned that the highly misleading comments from Ms Stevens appear on the BFAWU website – and are likely, therefore, to have misled the public.

As an aside, I note that your letter to me of 24 March is publicly displayed on the UK Parliament website, yet our replies are not. On 30 March, we were told by your committee specialist, Ian Cruse, that you would be "publishing both replies shortly."

I am sure that the committee does not wish to mislead the public, or MPs, so a public correction of Ms Stevens' comments and the publication of Wetherspoon's responses to your letters would surely be advisable.

Best wishes

Tim Martin, Chairman  
J D Wetherspoon plc

JAMES DORNAN MSP

19 March 2020

# MSP STIRS STRIFE WITH SPOON SLUR



PHOTO CREDIT: GETTY IMAGES

Scottish Member of Parliament (MSP) James Dornan (pictured) used his Twitter account to incorrectly accuse Wetherspoon of opening one of its pubs, when all pubs were closed.

And when it was pointed out to him by The Scottish Sun that this was completely untrue, he immediately deleted the tweet.

However, he has refused to apologise for his incendiary tweet.

The Scottish National Party MSP wrote on Twitter: "Apparently a Wetherspoon (sic) pub near me is still open.

"I really hope that at the end of this the owner is sued if it can be proven anyone got the virus there."

After being contacted by journalists, he added on Twitter: "I've since been told that staff were on site for a short period, but it wasn't open to the public."

Wetherspoon's chief executive, John Hutson, added: "We categorically deny that the pub opened.

"It was shut, like all other pubs across the UK, in line with the government's directive.

"It would have been helpful, and the right thing to do, for Mr Dornan to tweet a message apologising to staff at the pub and to Wetherspoon itself."

# WETHERSPOON NEWS PRESENTS BOTH SIDES, SO THAT READERS CAN DECIDE...

In the aftermath of 'lockdown', Richard Molloy, award-winning beer writer, criticised Tim Martin in local Torbay paper the Herald Express. In the best tradition of journalism, Tim was given the opportunity to reply, just as he was in other publications, such as Aberdeen's Evening Express and Portsmouth's The News.

*Herald Express, Wednesday 22 April 2020*

## RICHARD MOLLOY

**W**AS in my pub yesterday - cold, dark and stripped of the spirits, wines and other vestiges that welcome those wishing to escape the hectic rat race of the former outside world. The fruit machine stands yawning; propped open to deter those who may wish to soften their own hard times by breaking more than the current law that forbids the crossing of our threshold.

It felt unloved, unloved. A room so different for the absence of chatter and laughter of the drinking throng. It was sad and sobering - the antithesis of its former self.

The closure of licensed premises came upon publicans suddenly and with predictably poor timing - the Friday evening announcement rendering a weekend's worth of beer idle. Small business owners were stripped of their routine, income and purpose; and I guess we weren't so different to others as we entered the kind of survival mode that I had never contemplated before, but seemed unnervingly natural within a couple of days: premises were secured, staff furloughed and direct debits cancelled with debts and repayments negotiated. Within a few days we were mothballed.

Now what? A lot of bloody admin, that's what.

Thankfully not my job. The more efficient and organised members of the family have the complicated task of applying for grants and 'government guaranteed' loans that aren't actually available to anybody without the mental elasticity needed to crack The Da Vinci Code or understand what the hell is going on in 12 Monkeys (don't watch it again!)

After this obvious course of action came the real head scratching for many licensees. So used to being the ring masters, counsellors and clowns, we now found ourselves without an audience.

Most of us lost our incomes; temporarily for those awaiting furlough payments or self employed remuneration, but indefinitely for some who are directors of limited companies.

We also found ourselves estranged from those who used the pub as a support network, and their wellbeing became the focus for many landlords and landlords.

Reports continue to come in of pubs serving meals to the homeless, running online charity quizzes and music festivals. Many others are delivering food to the elderly and vulnerable. Some have set up community shops and one licensee in Woking is even providing PPE for NHS staff using the pub's 3D printer.

Even with the profits (over-estimated by most) taken away, many pubs continue to willingly and gladly shoulder the responsibility of being guardians of the community.

Contrast this then, with Tim Martin's kneejerk response to his JD Wetherspoons outlets being forced to close. The millionaire chairman stated his company could not afford to pay its staff until the Government released furlough payments.

He also initially refused to pay suppliers, many of them small companies whilst insisting, with absolutely zero proof, that there had "hardly been any" transmission of the covid 19 virus in pubs and also threatened to defy the authorities and keep his drinking foyers open.

It seems as though we are in this for the long haul and I urge people to take note of what many pubs - much maligned in certain sections of the media - are doing in these difficult times. I also urge you to remember how Tim Martin reacted when the pubs reopen and you decide where to celebrate.

» **Richard Molloy is the British Guild of Beer Writers Trade Writer of the Year**



*Herald Express, Wednesday 29 April 2020*

## LETTERS EXTRA



Wetherspoon boss Tim Martin responds to columnist Richard Molloy's criticism of how his firm reacted to Covid-19

» TORQUAY publican Richard Molloy, like many commentators, is trying to find a pantomime villain to blame during the UK's lockdown.

His anti-Wetherspoon diatribe (Herald Express April 22) includes the ludicrous Twittersphere fantasy that Wetherspoon "threatened to defy the authorities and keep its drinking foyers open" past the pub closures. Cobblers actually, just ask any of our Torbay customers.

He also alleges Wetherspoon said it "could not afford to pay its staff until the Government released furlough payments" and criticises our behaviour towards suppliers. In fact, in a video sent to staff on March 23, three days after pubs closed, Wetherspoon said "all our endeavours are going to be on trying to make sure that you get your (furlough) money and that the pubs reopen."

At exactly the same time as the video, an email was sent to staff saying "all employees will be paid as normal on Friday, March 27".

Indeed, staff have been paid weekly ever since pubs closed, and agreement has been reached with most suppliers, many of whom we've traded with for 40 years.

Attacking Wetherspoon for its employment practices seems counter-intuitive. We have been named as a top employer by the Top Employers' Institute for 17 years in a row and pay about 50% of company profits every year as a bonus to pub staff.

More than 10,000 current employees have been awarded free shares over the years - and pub managers have worked for us, on average, for 11 years.

The surprising thing about Richard's comments are that he admits himself to "cancelling direct debits", negotiating payments and to delayed income for those "awaiting furlough" - the villainous actions for which he criticises Wetherspoon.

In reality, Richard's actions are completely understandable. His pub business, in common with the entire industry, is, as he says, "in survival mode".

However, in spite of the psychological need for a scapegoat, criticising competitors like Wetherspoon won't help pubs reopen.

For that reason, pantomime villains should perhaps stay within the confines of the theatre.

● Articles courtesy of Herald Express

*Editor's note:* "In an interview with leading hospitality magazine *The Caterer*, dated 19 February 2021, TV chef and restaurant owner Angela Hartnett, who used to work for Gordon Ramsay, criticised Wetherspoon for 'destroying' communities. Wetherspoon responded to this rather unusual allegation in the letter below."

**THE CATERER** 19 February 2021

Ms Hartnett was asked by the interviewer in the magazine: "Have people realised the importance of restaurants to communities?"

Angela Hartnett answered:

“One thing that has changed since I started working in the industry 30 years ago is that everywhere in London now has its own neighbourhood.  
 “I live in east London and I don't need to leave my doorstep to get great Japanese, great Indian, great fish and chips.  
 “Restaurants have become very local; people go to their local restaurant.  
 “Pubs are equally as important, and I think pubs are going to suffer far more than restaurants after lockdown because pubs generally were on their way down.  
 “Companies like Wetherspoon have destroyed that community – the lovely pub on the corner – and I think they really will suffer.”

**Reply by Wetherspoon to The Caterer:**

5 March 2021

Dear Editor

Angela Hartnett (The Caterer, 19 Feb) says that her East London neighbourhood has "great Japanese, great Indian and great fish and chips" and that "companies like Wetherspoon destroyed" that sort of community. However, Ms Hartnett should consider a number of points before criticising Wetherspoon. Wetherspoon paid £764 million of taxes in 2019, one pound in every thousand collected by the government, a major community contribution. Wetherspoon employs 37,516 people, 15,032 of whom own shares in the company, and has won many awards for training and staff development. In the last 15 years, Wetherspoon has awarded bonuses and free shares costing £428 million to staff, a sum equivalent to 55% of our profits after tax. Wetherspoon has won more awards from English Heritage and CAMRA

for the design and restoration of old and listed buildings than any other company. Wetherspoon also has more pubs listed in the Good Beer Guide than any other company and has the highest rating of any large pub company on the local authority-run "scores on the doors" scheme, with an average score of 4.96 out of 5. Around 95% of Wetherspoon pubs are outside the central London area where Angela lives and works. Many of these areas don't have "great Japanese" on the doorstep and Wetherspoon pubs, as their success indicates, are popular in local communities. Yours sincerely  
**Eddie Gershon, spokesman**  
**J D Wetherspoon plc**  
**Watford, Hertfordshire**

*Editor's note:* "During the first lockdown in 2020, Wetherspoon needed to raise some money from shareholders in an 'equity placing' on the London Stock Market.

In order to do so, a business plan was drawn up which ESTIMATED that pubs would reopen in late June 2020.

In what can only be described as a series of absurdly inaccurate hatchet jobs, several publications dishonestly said, or implied, that Wetherspoon planned to reopen in June 'despite lockdown'.

These fibs might seem like mere hyperbole today, but, in the fevered atmosphere of the first lockdown, the false allegations induced real animosity."

**MailOnline**

29/30 April 2020

In relation to false allegations that Wetherspoon planned to open in June 2020, despite lockdown, the Mail Online published the following correction and clarification:

“**Correction:** In articles dated 29 and 30 April 2020, we reported on the pub chain Wetherspoon's plans to reopen in June. We have been asked to make clear that Wetherspoon does not plan to open its pubs and hotels in June in breach of lockdown restrictions and will only reopen its pubs and hotels when allowed to do so by the Government.”

It also included the following statement from Wetherspoon's spokesman Eddie Gershon:

“**Clarification:** Wetherspoon spokesman Eddie Gershon said: "Wetherspoon has no hotline to the government as to when pubs might be permitted to reopen and we doubt if the government itself has yet made a decision on this.

Like all companies we are trying to make a plan for the future and are guessing that they may be allowed to reopen in late June, around three months after they closed.

However, that is just an estimate and may prove to be entirely incorrect. Wetherspoon, like all pub companies, closed its doors when ordered to do so by the government – and will only reopen when it is permitted to do so.”



# AN EXAMPLE OF NOT SO SUBTLE DISTORTION...

The Financial Times has, in recent years, rarely avoided an opportunity to criticise Wetherspoon. On many of the big financial issues of recent decades, Wetherspoon and the Financial Times have been on opposing sides of the argument.

In this case, Wetherspoon's chairman was contacted by a Financial Times journalist who had become aware of completely inaccurate reports, as Mr Martin pointed out (5b below), that Wetherspoon was going to open its pubs at the end of June "despite the lockdown".

The exchange of texts between Mr Martin and the journalist makes it crystal clear that this was not the case.

Wetherspoon had closed its pubs in March 2020, as soon as it was ordered to do so by the government – and it planned to reopen only when permitted.

The company issued a press release making its position ultra clear (5a).

The FT vehemently opposed Tim Martin's views on Brexit and seemed determined to find an anti-Wetherspoon line anyway (5c), so its headline said that Wetherspoon planned to open "despite the lockdown" – which was completely untrue.

The headline was reinforced by the first sentence from the journalist, which said that Wetherspoon planned to open in June "in spite of a lack of government guidance".

Students of journalism and those interested in newspapers may wish to study the texts in 5b, below, between Tim Martin and the FT, along with the subsequent article in 5c, also below.

## 5a JDW press release issued 18:18, 29 April 2020

**From:** News  
**To:** Financial Times journalist  
**Subject:** PRESS RELEASE  
**Sent:** 29 April 2020 18:18

Wetherspoon spokesman Eddie Gershon said:  
 "Wetherspoon has no hotline to the government as to when pubs might be permitted to reopen and we doubt if the government itself has yet made a decision on this.

"Like all companies we are trying to make a plan for the future and are guessing that they may be allowed to reopen in late June, around three months after they closed.

"However, that is just an estimate and may prove to be entirely incorrect.

"Wetherspoon, like all pub companies, closed its doors when ordered to do so by the government – and will only reopen when it is permitted to do so."

ENDS

## 5b Text messages 18:08–18:17, 29 April 2020

Hi Tim, see that you are planning to reopen in June. Is that all pubs? And any social distancing measures? Hope all well

Financial Times journalist to Tim 29 April (18:08)

It's total and complete cobblers - we have no insight whatsoever as to when pubs might reopen and no information from, or hotline to, the government. We've made an assumption, just for planning purposes, that pubs MIGHT be allowed to open in late June- but we don't know any more than anyone else. Best, Tim

Tim replies to Financial Times journalist 29 April (18:13)

Ah! That's absolutely fine - so others are not reporting correctly? Thanks Tim

Financial Times journalist to Tim (18:14)

Indeed -they're not letting the facts get in the way!!!

Tim to Financial Times journalist (18:17)

## 5c Online FT article (circa 20:00, 29 April 2020)

# WETHERSPOON TARGETS JUNE REOPENING DESPITE LOCKDOWN RESTRICTIONS

## Pub group sets out £141m share placement to see it through crisis

Financial Times journalist APRIL 29 2020

JD Wetherspoon has said that it plans to reopen its pubs and hotels "in or around June" in spite of a lack of government guidance thus far on when lockdown restrictions will be lifted.

But although it gave the date in an update to the stock market, Tim Martin, the pub group's chief executive, said it was "complete cobblers" to suggest that the company had firm plans.

"We have no insight whatsoever as to when pubs might reopen and no information from, or hotline to, the government," he said.

Restaurants, pubs and bars are expected to be among the last allowed to reopen once the lockdown, which was put in force by the government on March 20, is lifted. Many fear that even when they are allowed to reopen, social-distancing measures will severely limit their capacity, with a knock-on effect on sales.

*Editor's note:* "The Daily Telegraph and The Guardian, in different ways, published highly misleading articles about Wetherspoon, for which they have both apologised.

The Daily Telegraph reported that Wetherspoon had staff shortages and that chairman Tim Martin had 'urged Boris Johnson to introduce a visa scheme for EU workers' – which was completely untrue.

The Guardian reported that Wetherspoon 'planned to buy up smaller pubs on the cheap' – this is also, as we explain, cobblers.

Fair play to The Daily Telegraph and The Guardian for publishing quick apologies and corrections, but this sort of misinformation is extremely harmful."

## The Daily Telegraph

4 June 2021

### Apology and correction published by The Daily Telegraph, Friday 4 June 2021:

“**Correction:** [The Daily Telegraph] article may have given the impression that Wetherspoons, in common with other companies in the hospitality sector, was struggling to recruit staff. In fact, Wetherspoons is not facing staff shortages or recruitment issues. We apologise for any confusion and are happy to correct the record.”

**Following the inaccurate Daily Telegraph article, Wetherspoon issued the press release below, which was published by the London Stock Exchange:**

#### JD WETHERSPOON PLC NEWS RELEASE - CORRECTION

Released : 02 Jun 2021 13:20

The Telegraph newspaper published an article online yesterday ("Wetherspoons boss calls for more EU migration as bars and restaurants tackle staff shortage" - 1 June 2021), which misrepresented Wetherspoon's position.

The Telegraph journalist contacted Tim Martin, the Wetherspoon chairman, and requested comments regarding reports of staff shortages in the hospitality industry generally.

Following the press query, Mr Martin personally made enquiries within the company and, in subsequent texts to the journalist, said "anecdotal feedback from ... pubs since reopening [is that there are] lots of people applying generally."

Mr Martin's texts also said that for a "new pub opening last week (in a town in North Yorkshire), for example, [there were] 160 applications for 70 jobs."

Mr Martin's texts added that "there were 20 applications for four vacancies" in a Bedfordshire pub and there was "a good volume of applications for vacancies in Bletchley and Milton Keynes".

Mr Martin concluded that it was "a reasonably good position for JDW in the country" and that "recruitment is more challenging in some seaside towns- but that's no different to what we experience in any year."

The anecdotal evidence provided by Mr Martin was not reported by the journalist, who instead said that "British pubs and restaurants struggle to recruit staff in the post-pandemic labour market squeeze".

The journalist also said "pub and restaurant bosses warned they were being forced to shut sites during the crucial lunchtime trade due to a shortage of workers", which the article implied was a problem for Wetherspoon- and which is clearly not true from the evidence provided by Mr Martin to the journalist.

The article also said that Mr Martin "urged Boris Johnson to introduce a visa scheme for EU workers".

In fact, Mr Martin has had no contact whatsoever with Mr Johnson since he became Prime Minister.

Mr Martin, as with many Brexit supporters, has, however, supported an Australia-style immigration points system,

with the possibility of preferential visas for countries in close proximity to the UK, as Australia operates with New Zealand, for example (See, for example, Mr Martin's evidence to the House of Lords Economic Affairs Committee on 8th March 2017 - Appendix 1 see opposite).

Tim Martin said: "I was trying to be helpful to the journalist by providing up-to-date anecdotal information on staffing, which clearly demonstrated a very positive situation for Wetherspoon.

"However, my comments were misreported.

The false story, expressed in the headline "Wetherspoons boss calls for more EU migration as bars and restaurants tackle staff shortage" and expressed or implied elsewhere in the article, was that Wetherspoon was suffering staff shortages, which clearly isn't true, and that I had subsequently been moved to change my stance on immigration, which, as my evidence to parliament several years ago clearly shows, isn't true either.

#### APPENDIX 1 Extract

Tim Martin's evidence to the House of Lords' Economic Affairs Committee (published 21 July 2017)

Page 21: Members present: Lord Hollick (The Chairman); Lord Burns; Lord Darling of Roulanish; Lord Forsyth of Drumlean; Lord Kerr of Kinlochard; Lord Lamont of Lerwick; Lord Layard; Lord Sharkey; Lord Tugendhat; Baroness Wheatcroft.

The Chairman: Given the expected end of free movement of people between the UK and EU, what would you like to see replacing it that would control immigration?

Mr Tim Martin: At the risk of incurring the wrath of Lord Darling, I think the referendum was about democracy.

You touched on the issue earlier. Looking round the world, New Zealanders can work in Australia; the Irish could work here and we could work there long before the EU.

There is an argument based on pragmatism and proximity. EU workers have been allowed to come and work here in

the past, and there is a case for them being able to do so in the future on some preferential basis, partly on grounds of pragmatism.

The reason it would be very difficult to do the same thing for India or China is that they have 2.5 billion people between them and you just cannot open your borders to them on a pragmatic basis; but on a preferential work permit basis, and with the historical links with Ireland, which will continue, you can do something for EU countries.

The Chairman: Do you see the Government playing a role in saying that the hospitality industry, or even the pub sector of

it, can have so many people, or would you allow the market to decide that?

Mr Tim Martin: I do not know the answer to that, but for the UK to be a successful country and economy in the next 20, 30 or 50 years we need a gradually rising population, and that will need some type of reasonably controlled immigration.

If we do not get it, the economy will tend to go backwards. We need a North American or Australian-type system.

**theguardian**

19 January 2021

Following an announcement by the company, in which it raised some money on the London Stock Market (a 'share placing') in January 2021, The Guardian newspaper made some highly inaccurate comments, which it has agreed to correct.

In an article dated 19 January 2021, The Guardian said that Wetherspoon planned to "buy up smaller pubs on the cheap" and that it planned to buy "pubs driven to financial ruin".

The company issued a press release (see 1 below) which corrected The Guardian's article.

The Guardian issued an apology and correction (see 2 below).

**1. Wetherspoon's press release:**

Released by J D Wetherspoon on 22 January 2021

A Guardian newspaper article (19 January), following the announcement of an equity placing by Wetherspoon on the same day, said that "Wetherspoon moves to buy smaller pubs on the cheap amid Covid crisis" and that "it is targeting pubs in central London."

These statements are completely untrue. Wetherspoon operates pubs which are three or four times larger than average and rarely "targets" existing pubs.

Wetherspoon's press release on 19 January said that the company is "considering... a number of properties in central London, the freehold reversion of pubs of which it is the tenant, and properties adjacent to successful pubs".

All the company's pubs in central London had other uses before Wetherspoon's occupation - for example, the headquarters of the Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank, the former Marquee Club and the former ballroom of the Great Eastern Hotel.

Wetherspoon chairman Tim Martin said: "The downfall of the master spy Karla in John Le Carré's epic novel was precipitated by creating a fictitious "legend for a girl".

The Guardian should avoid legends and stick to the truth, lest it suffers the same fate as Karla. ”

**2. Correction and apology by The Guardian newspaper, dated 22 January 2021:**

This article was amended on 22 January 2021, Wetherspoon has not stated that it intends to buy up "smaller pubs" as the headline of the earlier version said.

This was an error based on reported plans by the Redcat Pub Company.

Neither did Wetherspoon's recent statement to investors say it planned to buy pubs in general as the article said. Rather the company announced that it is, "considering the acquisition of a number of properties in central London, the freehold reversions of pubs of which it is currently the tenant, and properties adjacent to successful pubs".

We apologise to J D Wetherspoon for these errors. ”

**yahoo!**  
finance

2 June 2021

Following the inaccurate Daily Telegraph report, a considerable number of other publications repeated the same story and agreed to publish corrections.

“ **Correction:** In an article dated 2 June 2021 titled, "Brexit-supporting Wetherspoon boss calls for more immigration to plug staff shortages" it was suggested that Wetherspoon was having problems recruiting staff.

In fact, as it has been acknowledged by the UK Telegraph newspaper who first published the incorrect story on 1 June 2021, Wetherspoon has not experienced any atypical recruitment issues and was in "a reasonably good position".

It is accepted that Wetherspoon is not facing staff shortages or recruitment issues.

We apologise for any confusion and are happy to correct the record. ”

**METRO**

2 June 2021

The Metro agreed to publish the following correction:

“ **Correction:** This article may have given the impression that Wetherspoon was having problems recruiting staff.

In fact, Wetherspoon has not experienced any atypical recruitment issues and is not facing staff shortages.

We apologise for any confusion and are happy to correct the record. ”

“Bloomberg Businessweek (an American weekly business magazine) wrote an article about Wetherspoon, dated 26 February 2021, which contained many inaccuracies. The company issued the press release below, which was published by the London Stock Exchange.”

**JD WETHERSPOON PLC NEWS RELEASE – CORRECTION**

“ An article in Businessweek (26 February), regarding Wetherspoon, contains a number of inaccuracies:

- the article says that Wetherspoon plays “host to drunken students”.

This is a serious allegation to make about a pub company.

“Playing host” in this way would be unlawful, since pubs have a legal obligation, enforced by the licensing authorities, to prevent drunkenness.

Pub liquor licences can be lost if legislation is not adhered to. Wetherspoon has never, in its history, lost a licence on these grounds.

- the article says Wetherspoon is “sacrificing worker pay for affordable prices”.

However, average Wetherspoon pay, excluding management grades, is 12% over the minimum wage.

In addition, Wetherspoon paid bonuses and free shares (see table opposite) to employees equivalent to 55% of its profits after tax in the last 15 years. 15,032 employees own shares in the company.

Since the share scheme was introduced, Wetherspoon has awarded 20.6 million free shares to employees, approximately 16% of the shares in issue today.

- the article says that Wetherspoon “took advantage of a beer supply surplus to secure cheap contracts”.

This is untrue.

The company has never been made aware of a “beer surplus” and believes that “taking advantage” would be impossible, since beer is produced in short cycles, in line with current demand.

- the article says that Wetherspoon “unlike traditional pubs ... divides its pubs into gridlike seating plans... reducing the frequency of chance interactions”.

This claim is completely untrue.

There is no observable difference between Wetherspoon seating layouts and those of many competitors.

The reference to reducing interactions is entirely fictional.

- the article says that Wetherspoon “leverag(ed) it’s (sic) scale to beat out smaller competitors”.

This is misleading.

There are far more competitors now in the hospitality industry than there were in the past: coffee shops, restaurants and cafés, which sell many of the same products as Wetherspoon, have grown exponentially.

Many smaller pub competitors, trading in close proximity to Wetherspoon, like Loungers, Fuller’s, Young’s and St Austell, have grown substantially.

- the article refers to Wetherspoon as the “Most-Hated” pub company.

This is untrue.

An independent market research survey by CGA BrandTrack of 5,000 consumers in 2018, for example, reported that Wetherspoon is “the preferred brand to eat out at”.

A similar survey in 2019, also by CGA BrandTrack, found that Wetherspoon was the “standout choice for branded drinking occasions”.

- the article says that Wetherspoon’s chairman Tim Martin is “a lifetime skeptic of the EU” and that “he began in the 1990s to push for Britain to prune its ties with Brussels”.

This is untrue.

As Mr Martin has said, on a number of occasions, his first opposition to the EU was when it was proposed that the UK join the euro in around 2000, following the failure of the euro’s predecessor, the exchange rate mechanism, in the early 1990s.

Tim Martin said: “There are a number of other errors in the Businessweek article, but these are the main ones.

“It is important for the corrections to be in the public domain.” ”

## Wetherspoon: Bonuses and free shares v profits, 2006–20

Financial year	Bonuses and free shares	Profit after tax	Bonus etc as % of profit
	£m	£m	
2020	33	-30	-
2019	46	80	58
2018	43	84	51
2017	44	77	57
2016	33	57	58
2015	31	57	53
2014	29	59	50
2013	29	65	44
2012	24	57	42
2011	23	52	43
2010	23	51	44
2009	21	45	45
2008	16	36	45
2007	19	47	41
2006	17	40	41
<b>Total</b>	<b>428</b>	<b>777</b>	<b>55</b>

Source: J D Wetherspoon plc's annual reports and accounts 2006–20

## FREEDOM OF SPEECH

*Editor's note:* "The importance of freedom of speech is closely linked to the importance of finding the truth.

Good outcomes depend on finding out what's true, as many people have discovered.

Perhaps the main originators of false information about Wetherspoon were MPs Rachel Reeves and Jo Stevens (pages 6–7).

And the MP Neil O'Brien (page 16) has launched intemperate attacks, based on inaccurate characterisations, both online and in newspapers, vilifying government COVID critics.

Yet elected representatives, vital to democracy, are often themselves primary targets of trolling and vitriol, as the BBC article about Scottish MP Carol Monaghan (page 17) vividly demonstrates.

And journalists, too, are mercilessly attacked online, as the article by Christina Lamb of The Sunday Times shows (pages 18–19).

By encouraging ideas and debate, democracy works better than any other system.

Yet there is a huge tendency, in which both MPs and journalists are themselves often complicit, to demonise, vilify and censor non-mainstream views.

Unless anonymous trolls can be neutralised, which Toby Young is trying to achieve (back page), and unless the press and MPs stick to the truth, society as a whole will pay a heavy price."

*Editor's note:* "Both online and in the press, the MP Neil O'Brien has attacked critics of government COVID policies, contributing to their vilification and to an inhibition of debate.

In this article, he denigrates government critics by calling them 'Covid sceptics'.

That's untrue. The critics are, in fact, 'government policy sceptics'. O'Brien also uses sectarian language by referring to government critics as people who 'crawl from the woodwork'.

In my view, O'Brien's pro-Australian, anti-Swedish, hard-lockdown views won't age well.

Time, of course, will tell who is right..."

## I'D LOVE TO IGNORE 'COVID SCEPTICS' AND THEIR TALL TALES. BUT THEY MAKE A SPLASH AND HAVE NO SHAME

The Tory MP on the fantasies of those in the media, and beyond, who oppose lockdown

If you had opened certain newspapers over the past year, you would have read the following. In spring, you'd have been told the virus was fizzling out. You might have been treated to the views of epidemiologist Sunetra Gupta, who claimed: "The epidemic has largely come and is on its way out in this country." This wasn't due to the lockdown, she argued, but "the build-up of immunity", which government advisers were apparently underestimating.

By the summer, you would have read that it was all over. In June, Toby Young, editor of the Lockdown Sceptics website predicted: "There will be no 'second spike' – not now, and not in the autumn either. The virus has melted into thin air. It's time to get back to normal." Telegraph columnist Allison Pearson wrote: "The terrible Coronabeast will be gone from these isles by September."

By July, the sceptical narrative had changed. According to Ross Clark in the Daily Mail, there was nothing to fear. Boris Johnson's warning of a possible "second wave" was an unjustified "emotive" use of language. Rising cases in countries such as Spain were "little more than a statistical illusion" due to increased testing.

Globally, countries taking the toughest measures were getting great results. Australia, New Zealand, Korea, Japan and Taiwan all saw case rates at about a 20th of the EU average. The Covid sceptics trashed their approach as "sheer panic". Instead, libertarian Sweden was all the rage. Never mind that its death rate was 10 times that of its neighbours. They would have no second wave because they had wisely built up "herd immunity". In fact, there was a brutal second wave; Finland and Norway offered emergency medical assistance as Stockholm's hospitals overflowed. Even the king slammed the failed strategy.

As infections built up again in the autumn, the story changed once more. Though it looked like cases were rising, it was a "casedemic" brought on by faulty tests. "At least 91% of 'Covid cases' are FALSE POSITIVES," thundered Talk Radio host Julia Hartley-Brewer in September.

"There is no evidence of a second wave."

By autumn, there were more people in hospital with Covid but several papers ran pieces saying our hospitals weren't unusually busy in November. Some continued the pretence for an absurdly long time. On 29 December, Pearson wrote: "ICU occupancy is 78% today. Remarkably low for this time of year" and that "winter 2020 is the lowest hospital bed occupancy for 10 years. Yes, really."

However, as the new variant exploded and television news showed ambulances queuing outside hospitals that were full of people gasping for breath, the story had to change again. Yes, people were now dying but not in unusual numbers. On 4 January, Hartley-Brewer reassured us: "The virus kills. It just isn't causing excess deaths anymore." This was rather difficult to square with the Office for National Statistics saying 2020 saw the largest increase in deaths in England and Wales since 1940. So, others resorted to a different argument. Yes, 89,000 extra people had died but they would have died anyway. They were old or had "prior conditions", so were already on the way out. They didn't mention that 8,300 of them were of working age or that many "prior conditions" were non-fatal, such as asthma, diabetes, mental health or learning difficulties.

Powerful Covid-sceptics in the media have got it wrong at every stage. They fought to stop or delay every measure necessary to control the virus. They opposed masks, resisted travel restrictions, fought local lockdown tiers as well as national measures, often with conflicting arguments. Clark wrote again in October that local tiers were unfair and the PM wanted to "trash the northern economy", but when national measures proved necessary, he complained "we are going to close down restaurants in Cornwall to try to fight an epidemic in Manchester". In December, he said we should prioritise vaccinations in "the parts of the country which add most to the economy, London especially".

They rubbished those who knew what they were talking about. Professors Chris Whitty and Patrick Vallance were "Messrs Doom and

Gloom", "fear-mongering" and "self-serving". That Whitty and Jonathan Van-Tam used their tiny amount of spare time to volunteer in hospitals suggests that's not true. Now, as the death toll still rises, the same people crawl from the woodwork to demand we lift all restrictions as soon as the most vulnerable are vaccinated.

It's great that we are leading Europe in vaccinations and lockdown has meant cases are starting to fall back. But if we drop our guard, we could still risk many lives agonisingly close to the finish line.

Because they are still dangerous, I have pointed out the mistakes of some Covid-sceptics on Twitter. They regard this as outrageous. An MP shouldn't be getting involved in this. I "must not have any constituents who're struggling", says Hartley-Brewer. Young deleted all his tweets from last year and, in a joint podcast with alt-right conspiracy theorist James Delingpole, I was accused of being "a wrong un", a "fascist", and compared to Stalin's secret police chief Lavrenti Beria. (I didn't know you could be a Nazi and a Commie.) I've touched a nerve, it seems. Politicians are used to accountability. The guilty people within the media are not.

The truth is, the Covid-sceptics aren't really sceptics at all. They engage in motivated reasoning; they make stuff up and double down on disproved claims. They are powerful figures, not used to being questioned. But the truth is that they have a hell of a lot to answer for.

• Neil O'Brien is Conservative MP for Harborough, Oadby and Wigston, a former director of Policy Exchange and a vice-chair of the Conservative party

**By Neil O'Brien**

The Guardian / 17 January 2021

Print credit: [www.theguardian.com](http://www.theguardian.com)

*Editor's note:* "This report describes the shocking level of online abuse aimed at Glasgow MP Carol Monaghan. The police judged the threat to be so serious that Ms Monaghan, along with her family, was advised to move house. Ms Monaghan's critique of social media is spot on, yet, on pages 6–7, two senior female MPs fomented huge online abuse against Wetherspoon, by posting blatantly fabricated and untrue statements. Politicians, often the victims of abuse, cannot be parties to abuse when they feel (mistakenly) that it suits their political agendas."

# GLASGOW MP MOVED TO SAFE HOUSE AFTER DEATH THREAT

**A Glasgow MP who moved herself to a safe house after a death threat wants women in public life to have more protection.**

Carol Monaghan feared for her and her family's lives when online abuse turned into the detailed threat.

Earlier this month Jonathan Bell, 35, admitted his behaviour caused her "fear or alarm".

The SNP MP for Glasgow North West says social media companies must take action to end misogynistic abuse.

Twitter said it takes action against accounts which violate rules on abuse and harassment.

Like most women in politics, Ms Monaghan has always received attacks via her social media accounts.

But after a series of offensive tweets emerged from a particular individual, the attacks turned sinister.

Messages she was sent included references to murdered MP Jo Cox.

Then her constituency office in Partick was targeted, with windows being smashed.

While the MP was in London, the office front was splattered with ketchup.

"When my staff came in it was quite a disturbing thing to see," she told BBC Scotland's The Seven programme.

"It was obviously meant to look like blood across the windows. That was the start of the physical activities."

Things got worse when a death threat was made against her.

"It was phoned in and it contained enough details about my personal life, enough detail to cause the police to take it seriously," she explained.

"I got a call from my office manager. The police had contacted him to say there was what they considered to be a credible threat.

"They weren't necessarily sure I should come back to Glasgow. But I was keen that I did

come back to Glasgow - my family were here." Ms Monaghan was terrified for her family.

She said: "Because of the personal nature of the threat and the personal details, I knew he knew where I lived, I knew he knew who my kids were. I just had to be there.

"That evening when we came back from the police station to the house, the police wouldn't let us into the house until the whole area had been searched.

"They spent the night outside the house and very early the next morning we left and went to a safe place."

Bell harassed the SNP MP between January and April 2019.

At Glasgow Sheriff Court he pled guilty to causing fear or alarm. He will be sentenced next month.

Ms Monaghan puts a lot of what happened down to social media. She has endured a stream of abuse and has tried unsuccessfully to engage the platforms to deal with it.

"Social media gives people a platform, it gives them a way of directly contacting a person - at any time of the day or night," she said

"It gives them the opportunity to say things anonymously. It gives them a whole lot of protection that the target of their abuse does not have."

Ms Monaghan believes any woman in a public role is party to this abuse, and says she has been told to "grow a thick skin" and get used to it.

But, she says: "Really, why should we take that level of abuse? We wouldn't accept it in a workplace, but we are just supposed to take it and somehow we are to blame if we don't."

She is calling for safeguards to be put in place. Her main issue is with people being untraceable.

"This idea that an abuser on Twitter can stay anonymous cannot be right," she said.

"I understand some people want to interact

on Twitter anonymously for the best of reasons but there is also a huge hiding place for people who want to put more sinister stuff out there. We need a way of identifying users and take action against them for tweets that are offensive."

The MP has considered giving up politics because of the abuse, saying it wears her down. But although she says she is not planning to go yet, she admits she would probably not want any of her three daughters to go into politics.

She will keep pushing for change.

"Longer term, we need to consider how we deal with people in public-facing roles and how we put protections in place for them to ensure they can go about their jobs in a normal manner.

"I live here in Glasgow and I represent the area where I live and I love to walk about in this area. I don't want that to change. And I don't want it to change as a result of this."

In response, Twitter said: "Abuse and harassment have no place on our service. We have clear rules in place that apply to everyone, everywhere, that address threats of violence, abuse and harassment and hateful conduct, and we take action when we identify accounts that violate these rules."

BBC News online / 27 June 2021

Print credit: [www.bbc.co.uk/news](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news)

*Editor's note:* "Christina Lamb repeated an unacceptable comment, for which she apologised, previously made by the Duke of Edinburgh, in a report on the 99-year-old's funeral. As in the case of Carol Monaghan MP (page 17), the level of online threats and abuse, via out-of-control social media, is shocking. Since journalists, like MPs, are often the subject of abuse, they also have a duty to avoid inciting it. Yet two colleagues of Ms Lamb at The Times made false comments about Wetherspoon (pages 3–4), which also resulted in online abuse."

# NOTHING COULD PREPARE ME FOR THE ONLINE WAR: CHRISTINA LAMB ON BEING ATTACKED BY THE TROLLS

**One sentence was all it took. After social media took objection to her dispatch from the royal funeral, the foreign correspondent and her family have suffered a campaign of abuse, bullying and death threats**

**Last week I was filling in a form for a hostile environment course, something I have to attend every three years for my job as a war correspondent.**

"Have you experienced any particularly stress-related incidents?" it asked.

"Kidnaps, ambush, bombs ..." I wrote.

"You left out being shot at," my husband laughed.

"And something else," I replied. Neither of us laughed.

For two months I have rarely slept more than three hours a night. I check all the locks when I go to bed and worry if I don't hear from my student son each day. I cut short a romantic dinner with my husband because I thought a woman on the next table was staring at me.

None of this is because of traumatic experiences in wars but the consequence of a trip to Windsor on a sunny Saturday to cover the Duke of Edinburgh's funeral.

This is what online abuse does. We've all heard about it and maybe like me you dismissed it as "just words".

Perhaps you read the essay posted online last week by the Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. In it she explained how two young female writers she had encouraged whipped up a social-media storm after a 2017 Channel 4 interview in which Adichie said she believed "transwomen are transwomen".

Her protégées had responded by going online to call her a murderer, tell Adichie that her parents' deaths were "punishment for her transphobia" and accuse her of sabotaging their careers

"In this age of social media, where a story travels the world in minutes, silence sometimes means that other people can hijack your story and soon, their false version becomes the defining story about you," she wrote. "The assumption of good faith is dead.

What matters is not goodness but the appearance of goodness. We are no longer human beings. We are now angels jostling to out-angel one another." Like her, I wonder what is happening to our society that people think it's OK to post death threats and vitriol to a person and their family in response to words written as a deadline approached.

The worst week of my professional life started with a text from my editor asking me to cover the duke's funeral. She was persuasive, it seemed a moment in our history and I knew my mum would be impressed, so I agreed.

Everything went wrong that day. I'd booked a room at a guesthouse in Windsor thinking it would make my life easier, only for the fire alarm to go off halfway through the funeral. By the time it was sorted out I'd missed half the ceremony and had only an hour to write 1,500 words. Finally I sat down at my desk and started writing, opening with the moving image of the black-masked queen alone in the chapel. Wanting to contrast the duke as her great love to the old man who had become a figure of fun to many of us, I wrote the line that would cause all the problems: "To her subjects, Prince Philip was the longest-serving royal consort in British history — an often crotchety figure, offending people with gaffes about slitty eyes, even if secretly we rather enjoyed them."

With deadline approaching, I filed my copy, which would appear on the front page after going through a series of editors — all of whom read the line how I intended it to be read, or didn't notice.

The next day, I had arranged to take my mum for lunch out, a rare break from caring for my disabled father. On the way, I noticed some activity on Twitter, accusing me of being racist. I was confused. I have always felt it better not to engage as it just fuels the mob, so I tried to ignore it. Only later, after I had dropped Mum

back home, did I realise how many had read the sentence in a different way to what I intended. I had meant to say that we laughed at the duke's lack of diplomacy, not his racist comments. Indeed I had described his remarks as "offending". However I could see their point. I was mortified.

As a female journalist I am sadly used to online abuse, from jihadists who hate western women, or Pakistani hardliners because of my association with the activist Malala Yousafzai, whose autobiography I worked on. This was different. People apparently thought it was a perfectly reasonable response to abuse me, my husband and son. The jihadists were polite in comparison.

My most recent tweet had been a photo of two glasses on a balcony overlooking the Thames. We were celebrating the pubs reopening on my husband's birthday. That was seized on over and over by people accusing me of getting drunk by the river in Windsor while the funeral was on and "raising a glass to Phil the Greek at the Racist Arms". That the post was from London three days earlier was apparently irrelevant. To them, as they told me, I was a "f\*\*\*ing big-nosed racist wine-drinking c\*\*\*".

Then there were the death threats: "Don't walk around if I see you or your family I'll knock you out and so ur family," said dubstepbystep on my Instagram. Telling me I should be killed was the least of it.

"I feel sorry for your children. You f\*\*\*ing racist old hag, washed up trowel-faced old bitch," wrote Maddie Rainer.

Howard Wong, who runs an ice-cream company called Little Moons, thought it perfectly acceptable to track down my husband's account and post abuse about his "racist wife".

My Wikipedia page was repeatedly hacked, changing my description from bestselling author to “racist bigot”. One man on social media offered tips on how to start a concerted campaign against me.

Many of my abusers had only a handful of followers or were clearly bots. Disturbingly many were women. Instagram was even worse than Twitter.

Some people were lovely, tweeting in support (which I will never forget) but being rewarded by abuse themselves. Many, including Asians, sent me supportive messages. Others were silent, including young colleagues I have helped and writers claiming to stand for free speech, presumably scared that they would be tarred with the racism brush. One of my oldest friends asked me: “Why would you write such a thing?” as if I had done it deliberately.

I stopped looking at the messages. My husband went through them, reporting threats to Twitter, some of which were taken off, blocking other senders to try to protect me. He was left shaking.

Over my 33-year career I have taken on despots and dictators; now my nemesis was a fashion blogger called Susie Bubble, who runs a bubble-tea café in Stoke Newington, north London.

She launched a petition demanding an apology from me and The Sunday Times — even though the paper published an apology as soon as it could and I had apologised to anyone who wrote to me directly. There was no excuse for what I had written, I told people over and over again. At a speaking event the Tuesday after the funeral, I apologised at length. I posted the apology on my public Facebook page.

Bubbles’ organisation, the ESEA (East and Southeast Asia) Sisters, published all my social media handles. They contacted every organisation I have ever worked with — charities I am on the board of, publishers of my books, awards I am up for or have won, American think tanks I am affiliated with, places where I was due to speak. They posted malicious reviews on Amazon. They even contacted my college at Oxford demanding I be stripped of my honorary fellowship.

The actress Gemma Chan, whose film *Crazy Rich Asians* I had enjoyed, demanded that people sign the petition. This took it across the Atlantic where many of her followers seemed to think that it was me who coined the term “slitty eyes”.

The New York Public Library, where I was shortlisted for the Bernstein award for excellence in journalism, decided not to award the prize. Their letter to my publisher ended: “The award honours the noble profession of journalism, and is a reflection on The New York Public Library and its values. As such, we need to hold the candidates to the highest possible standards.”

The Washington-based International Women’s Media Foundation, which now has a whole online media abuse department

because of so many attacks, warned me to watch for identity theft and alert my bank. I was paranoid when, a few days later, a credit card stopped working.

For three weeks it took over our lives. Police came to question us and are keen to prosecute for malicious communication. We have to decide whether we want to go to court and stir this all up.

Every day I hear of professors, female politicians, lawyers, comedians and writers being abused or cancelled, or feeling they can no longer express opinions for fear of such a response. Many contacted me but did not want to speak out for fear of provoking more abuse.

I had read about cases such as that of the long-time New York Times health editor Donald McNeil, 67, forced out of his job this spring for repeating — not using out of malice — the n-word at a dinner for students on a holiday in Peru two years ago. He was part of a team that won the Pulitzer for coverage of the pandemic.

Adam Habib, 56, director of London’s School of Oriental and African Studies, was attacked and suspended for using the same word in response to a question after years of work promoting racial equality in his home country, South Africa. He has now been reinstated.

Neil Thin, 60, an anthropology lecturer at Edinburgh University, was attacked online for racism, misogyny and transphobia after he criticised a move last year to change the philosophy building’s name from David Hume Tower, named after the 18th-century philosopher who is now accused of links to slavery.

Thin had also raised concerns about a 2019 campus event called Resisting Whiteness, featuring an area exclusively for people of colour, which he branded “segregation”. Not only was he accused of being a “rape apologist”, but students circulated a letter saying they did not feel safe in his classes.

“They have destroyed my reputation, damaged my health and put a huge toll on my family,” he says. “I should be able to brush it off but the power of social media is to make you doubt what matters ... I’ve been beaten up badly three times in my life but this hurt an awful lot more.”

Thin faced a two-month investigation that exonerated him. His accusers faced nothing. Thin says he cannot go back into teaching until those who tried to destroy his reputation are investigated.

“The message the university is sending out is that the students can do exactly what they like and we are too scared to challenge them,” he said. “That’s a terrible way of educating students.”

The husband of one of two women who accused the former Scottish first minister Alex Salmond of sex abuse spoke to the Daily Record of the trolling she faced. “It felt like watching my wife self-harm when she was glued to a screen reading abusive comments,” he said.

When Newsnight reporter Nick Watt was chased and abused by lockdown protesters last week, there was widespread condemnation, even from the prime minister. When you are getting online death threats, there is silence. By the fifth day, I was on the verge of resigning. I was getting abuse from all over the world. “It feels like everything I worked for counts for nothing,” I told my husband.

It was some of the women I have written about who changed my mind. “Be strong,” said one woman in Afghanistan (yes, it had even reached there). “Don’t abandon us and cave in to a mob.”

She was right. If you are going to go after me for racism, fine: I am sorry and will say that loud and clear as often as you want. But then please go after the people who think it’s OK to spill vitriol online.

My detractors will say I am trying to present myself as a victim. But I have spent my career highlighting abuse and just because I am a target, it would be pathetic to stop now. I have a platform and believe it’s right to speak out.

I am a woman in her mid-fifties with lots of support from family, friends and employers, and a well-established career. But what about teenage girls, perhaps just starting out in a new job, insecure about themselves? No wonder some are driven to self-harm or suicide.

Yes, I am sorry for what I wrote, I have learnt from this and will read my copy more closely in future. But if I get something wrong, does it mean I am a racist?

As Adichie said in a conversation last week with Mary Beard, another woman who has also experienced online abuse: “Am I not allowed to just have a bad day?”



**By Christina Lamb**

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*Editor's note:* "If you want a good outcome, whether for a business, a government or personally, you need ideas and debate. On page 16, Wetherspoon News takes issue with Conservative MP and Oxford graduate Neil O'Brien for shutting down debate by vilifying government critics. I first noticed this autocratic tendency 20 years ago when the Financial Times, then almost exclusively an Oxbridge institution, censored anti-euro comment – hardly an intellectual approach. In this article, Toby Young takes up the cudgels and explains how he and his courageous team aim to take on the autocrats and bullies."



## IT'S TIME TO STAND UP FOR FREE SPEECH

**Social commentator Toby Young explains why and how his newly formed organisation - the Free Speech Union - will defend people's right to speak freely, without fear of being persecuted**

**P**iers Morgan was forced out as a presenter of *Good Morning Britain* when he said that he didn't believe all of the things Meghan Markle said in her Oprah Winfrey interview.

The banjo player of Mumford & Sons has been ejected from the band after he praised a conservative journalist on Twitter.

A director of Iceland was sacked after he made a joke on his blog about the Welsh language.

All of these things happened in 2021 in a country which prides itself on its commitment to free speech.

And these aren't isolated incidents.

During 2014–19, the police in England and Wales investigated 120,000 'non-crime hate incidents' – that's what they call it when you make an 'inappropriate' joke on Twitter or refer to a trans person by the wrong gender pronoun.

That means that our men and women in blue have been investigating an average of 66 'non crimes' every day.

Shouldn't they be policing our streets, not our tweets?

More than 75 years ago, service men and women from across the Anglosphere and the Commonwealth put their life on the line to defend freedom and democracy, including the right to express your views and opinions in the public sphere, however unorthodox, without fear of punishment.

### Attack

Today, scarcely a week passes without another attack being launched on free speech.

That's why I've set up the Free Speech Union – a non-partisan, mass-membership organisation which stands up for the speech rights of its members. My fellow directors include the author and journalist Douglas Murray and the Oxford professor Nigel Biggar.

We have 12 staff members, including a case management officer and a case officer.

If someone at work writes to your boss to complain about something you've said, we'll write to them, too, and remind them of the importance of intellectual tolerance and viewpoint diversity.

If a bunch of self-righteous bullies picks on you on social media, we'll pick on them.

If someone launches an online petition calling for you to be sacked, we'll launch a counter-petition.

One of the benefits of full membership is access to legal assistance – if we think you have good grounds for a lawsuit, we'll help you to fight it.

And if it looks as if it's going to be expensive, we'll help you to crowdfund, so that you can pay your legal costs.

The enemies of free speech hunt in packs; its defenders need to band together too. Whatever it takes, we'll defend your right to speak freely, without fear of being persecuted.

### Pale

The Free Speech Union hasn't been set up to protect just male, pale and stale conservatives like me.

If you think that you're safe because you're a woman or a member of the progressive left, think again.

The list of people who've been no-platformed – prevented from speaking in public by self-appointed morality cops who spend their life frantically searching for things to be offended by – includes the radical feminist Julie Bindel, the Women's Hour presenter Jenni Murray and Germaine Greer, author of *The Female Eunuch*.

Even the gay rights campaigner Peter Tatchell has been targeted by the thought police.

He was no-platformed by a group of students at Canterbury Christ Church University because he signed a letter to a newspaper opposing the policy of... no-platforming!

No one is safe from these witch-finder generals – which is why mavericks and dissenters of all stripes will be welcome in the Free Speech Union.

As a wise man once said, I may disagree profoundly with what you have to say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it.

Doesn't matter if somebody somewhere finds it offensive. As John Cleese says: "No one has the right not to be offended."

### McCarthyism

It's time to end this digital McCarthyism. Free speech isn't some luxury we can afford to live without – it's the foundational freedom on which all of the others depend.

We can't continue to appease the enemies of free speech.

As Churchill said: "An appeaser is someone who keeps feeding the crocodile in the hope that it will eat him last."

Many good men and women died fighting for our right to speak our mind and exchange ideas without being persecuted by the enforcers of intellectual conformity and moral dogma.

This is our precious inheritance and we owe it to them, as well as to our children, to come to its defence.

Join me in the Free Speech Union where, together, we can defeat the authoritarianism and intolerance which are once again threatening to destroy our liberty.

● **To join the Free Speech Union, visit the website or e-mail Toby: [www.freespeechunion.org](http://www.freespeechunion.org) | [info@freespeechunion.org](mailto:info@freespeechunion.org) Membership fees start at £2.49 a month.**