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Countries: United Kingdom

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Every year, the [European Broadcasting Union](#) (EBU) organizes [NewsXchange](#) , a conference described as a chance for the world’s leading public service media to discuss “bright ideas, opportunities and challenges for the international news industry.

This year’s conference—hosted in Edinburgh, Scotland—generated controversy by inviting former Trump administration chief strategist Steve Bannon as a speaker.

For Nicola Sturgeon, the First Minister of Scotland, inviting the former Trump advisor crossed the line between healthy debate and giving a public platform to hate speech. The Scottish politician explained her reasoning on Twitter:



Nicola Sturgeon ✓

@NicolaSturgeon

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I believe passionately in free speech but as [@ScotGovFM](#) I have to make balanced judgments - and I will not be part of any process that risks legitimising or normalising far right, racist views. I regret that the BBC has put me and others in this position.

In contrast, for BBC Scotland's Director Donalda MacKinnon, hosting Steve Bannon was not so much about giving him a platform as it was about doing the journalistic duty of holding power to account.

“It is really important in a conference that is absolutely about journalism that we go to the heart of our journalism and our journalistic practice, which is about holding people to account, which is about interrogating, which is about scrutiny,” she said at the Scottish Parliament’s culture committee meeting the Thursday before the conference.

Mackinnon added that giving controversial figures a platform allows journalists to publicly expose them, pointing out that former British National Party (BNP) leader Nick Griffin’s 2009 interview on *BBC Question Time* led to the fascist party’s destruction, largely because it exposed his “ludicrous” views to the public.

John Owen, the former Executive Director and one of the founders of NewsXchange, agrees that bringing polarizing figures in contact with journalists allows the media to hold them to account. Over the years, he has invited a number of controversial speakers, from the Somali-Dutch activist and former-MP Ayaan Hirsi Ali, to the at-the-time recently-elected Prime Minister of Turkey Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who has a global reputation for imposing restrictions on free speech to the point of jailing journalists and writers across the country.

Owen emphasises – “I respect the right of the NewsXchange organisers to invite Bannon or any other controversial speaker provided he or she is deemed relevant to the agenda of the conference.”

However, others feel that inviting controversial figures, like Bannon is predictable, at best. At worst, it gives them a platform to legitimize their views.

“Steve Bannon keeps getting invitations to journalism conferences, but interviewing him before an audience doesn't seem like the best way to thoughtfully break down his spin,” BuzzFeed Deputy Global News Director Ryan Broderick wrote in [an article](#) after of the conference.

“Some people will drop out,” he continues. “Other people will march in protest. There will be chaos. And then, Bannon will say nothing new.”

This begs the question: did the European Broadcast Union and the BBC invite Bannon to challenge his views, or was this a publicity stunt?

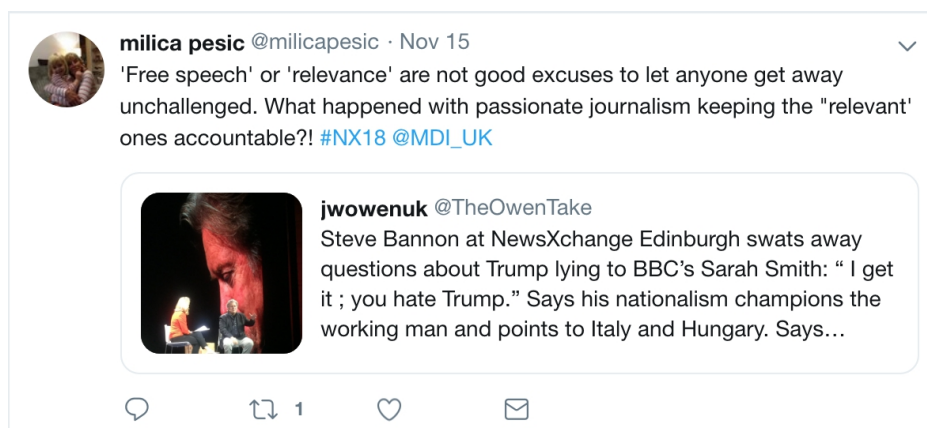
For John Owen, Bannon's explicit desire to manipulate the media takes this a step too far.

"Would I personally have invited Bannon to this year's NewsXchange Edinburgh if I was still the Executive Producer of NewsXchange? Probably not," John Owens reflects.

"Bannon is no longer a top White House political adviser to President Trump," he continues. "He now is a global rabble rouser bent on disrupting democracies and pandering to far right groups who can point to him to legitimise their own racist and hateful messages and policies."

Who won? Bannon, or the journalists? During the conference, Bannon alerted the participants that he is no longer content to rely on far-right media platforms, and wants to promote his views through the mainstream media. When BBC Scotland Editor-in-Chief Sarah Smith interviewed him, it was clear that he was well-prepared to de-rail her carefully prepared questions to attack the left-wing media—on the BBC itself, no less.

After attending this interview, MDI Executive Director Milica Pesic felt that Bannon was using NewsXchange as a vehicle to promote his views.



John Owen was similarly frustrated at the “missed opportunity,” and criticized journalists for not supporting Sarah Smith in countering Bannon’s Trump like responses.

“Knowing that Bannon would bully and stonewall, NewsXchange should have added a panel of experts to challenge Bannon and fact-check him after the interview,” he explained.

“Also the world’s broadcasters and media experts sat on their hands, and—with the exception of one Hungarian broadcaster—gave Bannon a free ride.”

It is clear that while many in the international media community value freedom of expression and a healthy debate, a traditional balanced and respectful interview style is not enough to challenge figures as skilled in the art of deception as Bannon. If we are going to give a platform to fascists, we also need to be prepared to take them on.