

Lancashire Post has to justify coverage of Tommy Robinson rally in Preston

From the [coverage of a campaign event staged in Preston](#) by far right candidate Tommy Robinson. Mike Hill responds to the complaints.

In the small hours of July 14, 2017 Tommy Robinson took to Facebook from the passenger seat of a darkened car...Several hours, and 200 miles later a grey Range Rover Evoque pulled into the car park of the Lancashire Post offices in Fulwood at 9.30am dropping off Robinson at his destination.

The former leader of the English Defence League was unhappy that this newspaper had described him as a 'far right extremist' and wanted to discuss his complaint with the news editor. Twenty minutes later his visit was over and Robinson was on his way after making his point and hearing ours.

We didn't report this incident in the newspaper or online. People make complaints to the newsroom all of the time. It wasn't a story then and it isn't one now.

This week the Lancashire Post has come in for considerable criticism for its coverage of Robinson's most recent visit to Preston as part of his electoral campaign for European Parliament. This criticism fell into two distinct categories. Those who believe the Post should not have covered his campaign event at all and those who disputed the accuracy and tone of the article.

We first became aware of Robinson's intention to speak in Preston several weeks ago but nothing was confirmed and so we chose not to publicise it. But the decision to send a journalist along to the event was a much easier one to make.

Whatever our views of Robinson's beliefs or policies we could not pretend a public event in a public place was not taking place.

After all the job of our journalists is to inform readers about life in their community, good and bad. And this was a man standing for public office. . . we would be failing in our duty if we shut our eyes and ignored the things we don't like. Covering the goings-on in our city does not 'normalise' or 'legitimise' those happenings. It condones the story as much as an article about graffiti condones vandalism.

Consider a simple question, where would readers turn to for answers if they saw a police presence at Ashton Park and wanted to know why there was a gathering of people and what was going on? We wouldn't say "sorry readers, we know but we're not telling you."

The fact there was a police presence, on and off the park, suggested police commanders believed there was a need for them to be there. Had any problems occurred then it would have been our role to report on that.

Someone did throw a brick at Robinson's big screen and was arrested and issued with a caution. Other than that no trouble materialised in Preston (or his other ports of call in Lancashire for that matter aside from one arrest in Burnley). This is a fact and not endorsement.

While the Post was criticised for 'giving a platform to the far right' it is important to understand what that means. Is the mere act of reporting on Robinson's presence 'giving him a platform?'

In which case we stand accused alongside media in those other towns across the North West where his election campaign called.

It may be grand to describe it as such, but this was a

political rally and yet the article does not showcase his policies at all and we did not interview him. This was no accident.

We have come under fire for not providing reaction from those who stand against Robinson and his views. Our reporter spoke to several people in attendance who oppose his values and not one person would speak on the record. Only one would offer a quote on the condition of anonymity.

But did we get everything right on Monday night? In a word, no. Many of those complaining were concerned we had overestimated the numbers of people present on Ashton Park. And we should have made it clear that it was an estimate.

We also upset people with the suggestion that it must have been 'galling' for the organisers of the protest in the city centre to have drawn 40 people. It may well have been galling to them – it may well not have been – but that was an opinion and in a factual news report there's no place for opinion and we apologise for that aberration.

On Sunday we will know just how successful Robinson's bid for public office has been when the returning officer reveals who will represent us in the European Parliament. We are covering the count in Manchester to bring you all of the details on our website and in Monday's Post. As you should expect.

I know what newspaper website to call up now for the results. If there was ever an admission that the media are engaged in a cover-up this is it. That we are in a situation where a newspaper is criticised for reporting