



B **N THE BOFFIN**

THE CAMPAIGN TO MAKE PHYSICS IN THE MEDIA ACCESSIBLE TO ALL

Limit Less

IOP Institute of Physics

About the Limit Less Campaign

Limit Less is the campaign to support young people to change the world and fulfil their potential by doing physics.

The Institute of Physics (IOP) wants to encourage young people from all parts of society, from all groups and backgrounds, especially those who are currently underrepresented in physics, to see that physics could be for them.

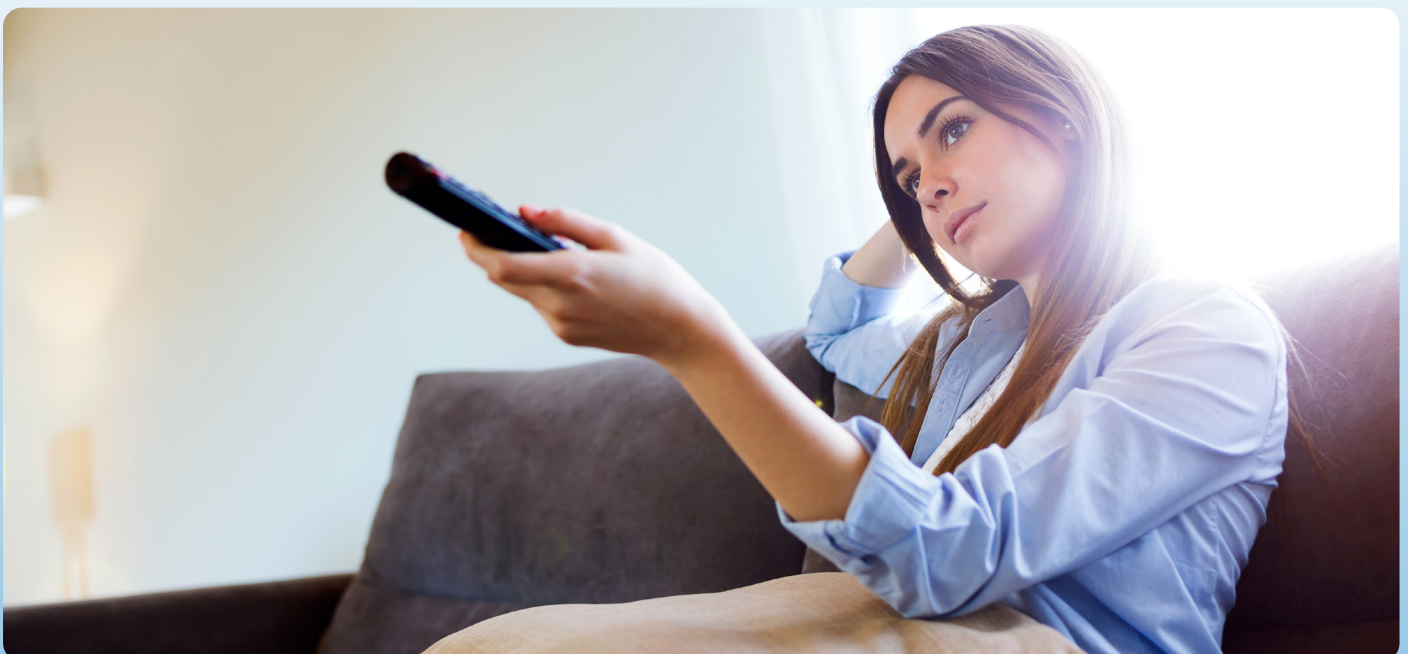
This is why we launched the Limit Less campaign. We aim to support young people to change the world – their world – and fulfil their potential by doing physics. We want to increase the number of young people from underrepresented groups in our society who do physics from age 16. To do this the Limit Less campaign is influencing the influencers of young people. One of these influencers is the media.

The Limit Less **#BinTheBoffin** mini-campaign seeks to influence the media by challenging the use of the word 'boffin' in the UK tabloid media to help combat the unhelpful, stereotypical depiction of physics and physicists in the media.

Our research shows that 15% of 11-17 year olds would be put off pursuing a subject further if they were to be called a boffin because of their interest in it. Changing the way that physics and physicists are represented in the media will help to enable these young people and those who influence them to feel that physics is for them.

'I can think of a few instances where girls, who had clearly done their research, pointed out that physics has a reputation for male chauvinism and felt they would have much broader opportunities with a maths degree. Given the image of physics in the media, and in history, it is not an easy perception to counter.'
– Male Teacher

'I never saw anyone like myself speaking about physics on the news.' – Female Physicist



Why do we want to **B**IN THE BOFFIN

We are challenging the use of the word 'boffin' in the media to help combat the unhelpful, stereotypical depiction of physics and physicists. Our research shows the word to be ambiguous, inaccurate and clichéd for the people reading it.

We're specifically calling on the **Daily Mirror**, the **Daily Star** and **The Sun** to stop using boffin in their reporting, due to their large circulation and ongoing use of the word. With a combined daily reach of over 1.5 million people, according to the Press Gazette, the impact of this change would be far-reaching.

But we know that it goes further than just one word, which is why we have produced some advice for journalists on how to make sure that reporting about physics and physicists is accessible to all their readers.

From who is quoted in a story to how physics is presented in imagery, there are many ways that the media can ensure that their reporting of physics and physicists is as accurate as possible. By doing so, more young people and the people whose opinions they trust will see and feel that physics is for them.

Read our media guide for journalists here: iop.org/MediaGuide

Boffin in the Media

Originally used to describe 'war-winning researchers from World War 2', the slang term boffin is now generally used to describe any type of scientist, especially one who is doing research.

In the first two months of 2023, boffin was used over 400 times by the UK media for a variety of topics including science, technology, entertainment and even sport.

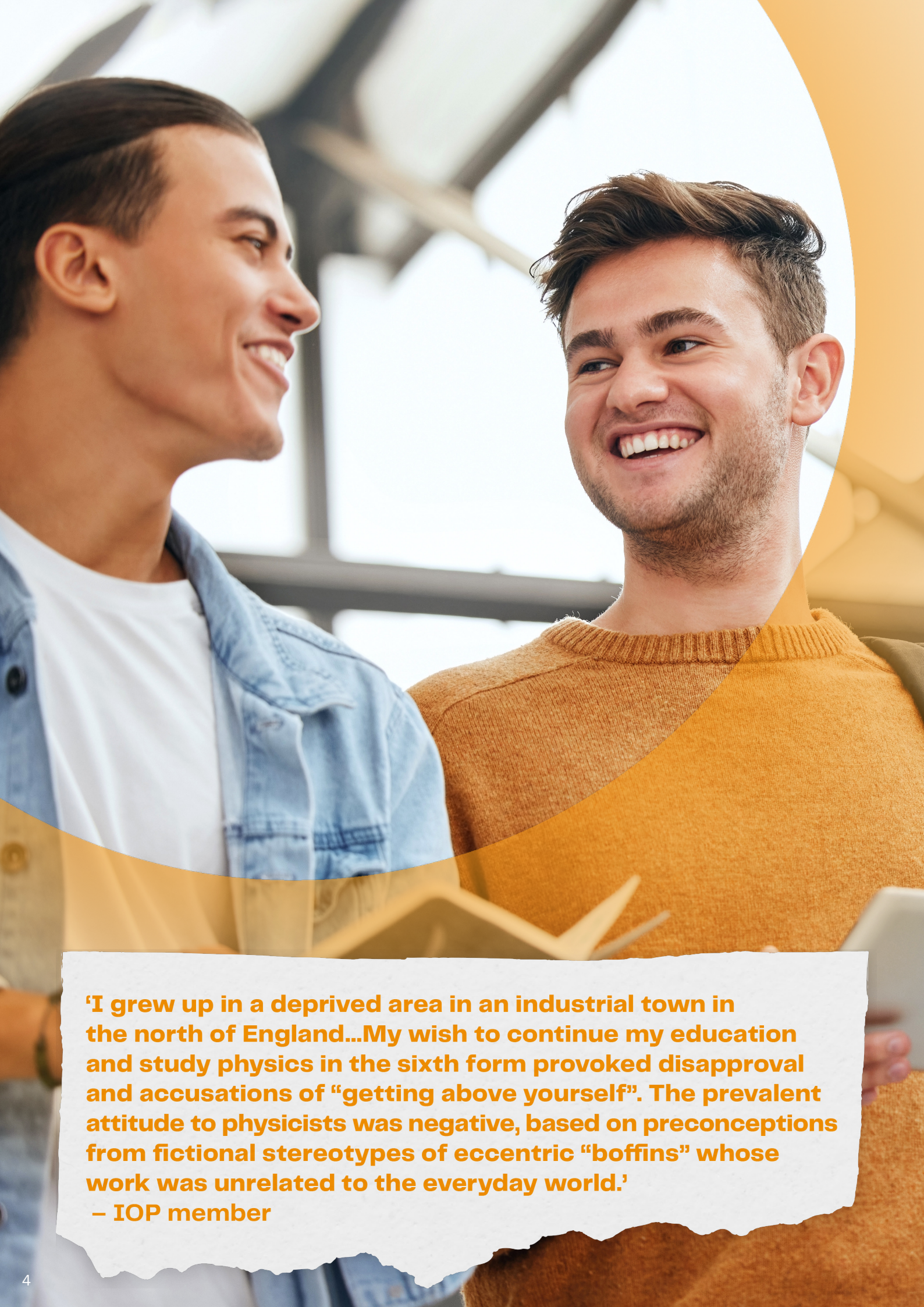
Below are some example articles that have used the term 'boffin'. But what does this mean to the people reading it? Turn over to find out...

Baldness could soon be cured after boffins discover the 'caveman gene'

A besotted Instagram poster labelled the beautiful boffin 'Steve Irwin with nails' as she gave wildlife lesson during the 35-second clip in a revealing crop top

TOP GUNNS Boffins predict final Premier League table and Arsenal and Man Utd fans will be VERY happy but it's bad news for Chelsea

Men who own flashy fast cars really have tiny dipsticks, boffins confirm



'I grew up in a deprived area in an industrial town in the north of England...My wish to continue my education and study physics in the sixth form provoked disapproval and accusations of "getting above yourself". The prevalent attitude to physicists was negative, based on preconceptions from fictional stereotypes of eccentric "boffins" whose work was unrelated to the everyday world.'

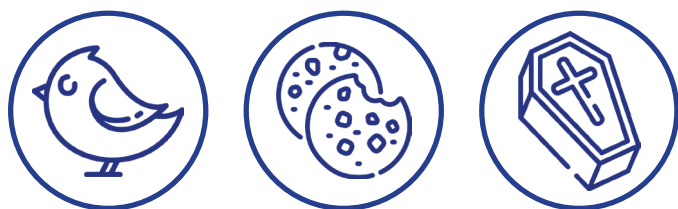
– IOP member

People don't understand what a boffin is, and when they do, they see a distinct image

The Institute of Physics (IOP) commissioned a survey of 1,000 young people (11–17) and 1,514 adults (18+) across the UK to gather attitudes about the word 'boffin' and the impact the word has on them.

Over a third of all adults and young people surveyed had never heard of the term before. For those who had heard the word before, there was confusion as to what boffin meant.

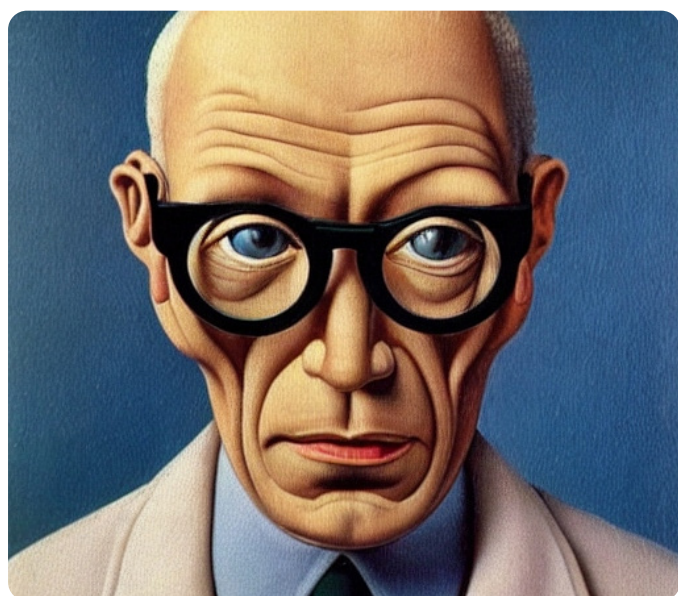
Suggestions that were put forward of what boffin means included a kind of bird, a type of biscuit, or even a fancy coffin.



However, when adults and young people were asked in three words to say what a boffin looked like to them, the answers painted a clear picture.

Some of the top words were glasses, smart, clever, hair, intelligent, geeky and nerdy, whilst others said things like male, white-coat, serious, studious, scientist, bald, brainy, tall and posh.

We fed the top 20 words from the survey into deepAI's machine learning image generator and this is what it produced.



The gendering of boffin was further evident with over ten times as many survey respondents thinking that the term boffin described a man than a woman.

With this stereotypical depiction of a scientist conjured up by the word boffin, what is the impact of this?

- **18–24-year-olds are nearly 80% more likely to view the term boffin as an insult than as a compliment.**
- **15% of 11–17-year-olds surveyed would be put off studying a subject further, if they were to be called a boffin because of their interest in it.**

We also surveyed 1% of all Institute of Physics members about the term, as these are some of the people who are being described as boffins in the media.

One IOP member said 'I was often called a boffin at school, and it was never meant kindly'.

Another member said, 'I don't think it's a helpful description of physicists for the media to use – it brings to mind a 'nutty professor' type, quite removed from the average person.'

It's time to...

B🗑️N THE BOFFIN

Any questions?

Why are you putting boffins in the bin?

We definitely don't want to throw away our brilliant scientists, experts and researchers – quite the opposite! We want them to get the credit they deserve for their work instead of being described by a confusing and stereotypical word like 'boffin'. And we want young people to see that physics is not just for those who fit a narrow stereotype. If young people from all backgrounds see themselves in the media's reporting of physicists, more of them will consider pursuing physics and enjoy the benefits this brings, both to themselves and to society.

So, why are you trying to get the word banned?

That's not what we are doing. This is not about censorship or demanding that politicians force the editors of **The Sun**, **The Star** and **The Mirror**, to scrap the word boffin. We are asking them – politely – to remove it voluntarily, because it mocks and disrespects scientists, and is a word that many of their readers simply don't understand. It is also very outdated and doesn't need to be used when there are so many better alternatives!

Well, what should journalists use instead of boffin?

Well, they could use "scientist" or even their job title. For example, instead of saying "Science boffin", they could use the much simpler, and more understandable, "Scientist". Similarly, describing someone as an "Astrophysicist" or "Medical physicist" will give readers more information about the person and their specific expertise, and show them that not all boffins are the same.

When asked what journalists should use instead of boffin, members of the Institute of Physics said "My name?"; 'Scientist!'; or 'terms more specific to the particular activity, eg plasma physicist, nuclear physicist, organic chemist, or whatever is appropriate.'

Aren't there bigger problems to solve than this?

Our focus on the word boffin is part of a much bigger campaign, Limit Less, that aims to ensure that those who young people look to for trusted opinions and advice are challenging the misconceptions and stereotypes that put off some young people from doing physics.

The media is a huge influence on young people's lives, and by improving the accuracy and accessibility of the reporting of physics and physicists, like avoiding terms such as boffin, more of them can see and feel that physics is for them. To help journalists do this, we have produced a media guide with practical tips, available at iop.org/MediaGuide.

And supporting this campaign doesn't mean you can't support any others! We support, and welcome support, from all walks of life.

How you can help

Use **#BinTheBoffin** on social media to add your voice of support by:

-  **Highlighting any use of the word boffin by (re)posting/ commenting with the hashtag.**
-  **Sharing your experience of boffin and the stereotypes associated with it.**
-  **Tweeting the newspapers (@TheSun, @DailyMirror, @DailyStar) with our gif asking them (politely) to stop using the word.**
-  **Adding a Bin the Boffin sticker to your profile.**

You can do the latter two either via our Twibbon Page (twibbon.com/support/Bin-The-Boffin), by searching GIPHY or by downloading the sticker and gif from iop.org/BinTheBoffin.

Find out more about Bin the Boffin:

Visit our Twibbon Page:



If you are a journalist, or know someone who is, use and share our media guide with advice on how to report on physics and physicists in an accurate and accessible way:

- Please send any feedback to campaigns@iop.org

If you are interested in learning more about the Limit Less campaign you can visit our webpages here: iop.org/LimitLess and sign up to our campaign emails.





Limit Less is the campaign to encourage and support young people, especially those currently underrepresented in the physics community, to change the world and fulfil their potential by doing physics. It seeks to challenge the misconceptions and stereotypes about the subject and remove the barriers to young people doing physics beyond the age of 16.

For more information about Limit Less, visit iop.org/LimitLess

For more information about Bin the Boffin, visit iop.org/BinTheBoffin

For further advice on the information, please contact campaigns@iop.org

The Institute of Physics (IOP) is the professional body and learned society for physics in the UK and Ireland. It seeks to raise public awareness and understanding of physics, inspire people to develop their knowledge, understanding and enjoyment of physics and support the development of a diverse and inclusive physics community. As a charity, it has a mission to ensure that physics delivers on its exceptional potential to benefit society.

The Institute of Physics is a charity registered in England and Wales (no. 293851) and Scotland (no. SC040092).

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Following the public launch of the Bin the Boffin initiative the Editor of the Daily Mirror, Alison Phillips, told the UK Press Gazette on Wednesday 29th March 2023 that she will remind her journalists of their historic ban on the use of the word 'boffin' in their style guide.

Please disregard the mention of the Daily Mirror in this pamphlet, and don't tag them in your support of Bin the Boffin on social media. If you do see that the publication has used the word boffin, please do still let us know by using the hashtag #BinTheBoffin.

We hope that the Daily Star and the Sun will follow suit soon.