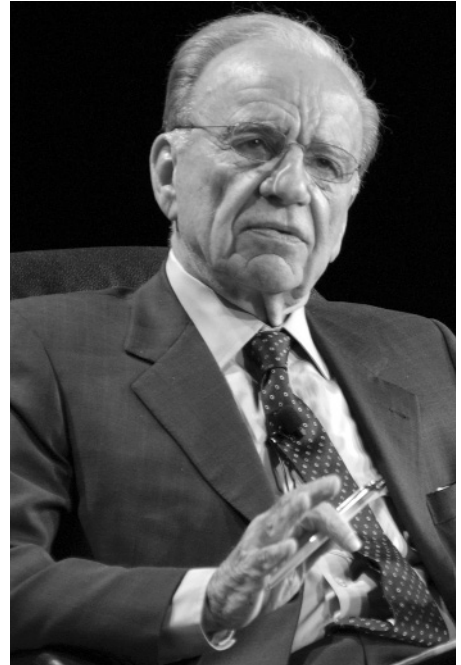


FREE Press

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MURDOCH MOVES IN ON ITV



Rupert Murdoch: 18 per cent stake

By Granville Williams

On 28 November the *Daily Telegraph* cleared its first three pages to run Jeff Randall's exclusive report on Michael Grade's defection from the BBC to ITV. It was a dramatic twist in the headline-grabbing events which had put ITV at the top of the news agenda for weeks.

It began on 10 November with the news that cable, broadband and mobile phone company NTL wanted to buy ITV for £4.7 billion. A week later, just after the markets closed on 17 November, BSkyB announced it had paid £940 million to acquire a 17.9 per cent stake in ITV. Jeremy Darroch, Chief Financial Officer of BSkyB, insisted it was a purely financial decision: "We invested because we think it is a high quality asset with a lot of growth potential."

BSkyB's real intention is very different. It wishes to increase Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation's grip on British media. Murdoch already controls 40 per cent of the UK national press. BSkyB generates 40 per cent of television revenue; the BBC licence fee just 23 per cent. BSkyB has a virtual monopoly over pay-TV which also includes monopoly control over the Electronic Programme Guide (EPG).

Ofcom has a complaint before it from Rapture, a youth entertainment channel, which believes BSkyB is charging

excessively high fees for the supply of an EPG service on the UK's only digital satellite platform. Ofcom is reviewing Rapture's allegation that the £76,000 fee demanded for one year's EPG was not cost-related, and that Sky would not negotiate on the price. If this is true, then BSkyB is in clear breach of the 2003 Communications Act.

BSkyB's raid on ITN poses a different problem for Ofcom. The Communications Act was a potent example of the power and influence Murdoch has over New Labour. The Act permits newspaper groups to hold 20 per cent of ITV, and the infamous "Murdoch clause" allows News Corporation to acquire Channel Five.

So what can Ofcom do? Nothing, unless Government ministers invoke the public interest test to prevent a powerful global media owner influencing or controlling ITV.

There are big issues at stake here. Columnists such as Peter Wilby, Polly Toynbee and David Puttnam have attacked Murdoch's predatory role in UK media and politics and attracted wide support, but the key question is, what can we do about it?

The first imperative is to give a focus to this widespread public concern. Labour MP for Selby, John Grogan, has put down an Early Day Motion (EDM) which offers one such focus. Contact your MP and ask them to support EDM 309. But the most important thing is to draw together a powerful coalition of

trade unionists, journalists, citizens' groups and politicians to rein back Murdoch's powerful grip on the media.

It won't be easy, but the CPBF will play an active part in creating it. At an Ofcom conference on 30 November James Murdoch launched an absurd attack on the BBC's "megalomania" and "authoritarian" broadcasting regulation. It was a clear signal to Tony Blair and his ministers not to interfere with BSkyB's foray into ITV.

But we agree with David Puttnam that it is time politicians "stopped shaping their electoral strategies in response to the leader columns of our national newspapers, and started demonstrating a belief that the votes of millions in the ballot box count for more than the self-interest of a handful of manipulative media barons".

We need to build a broad-based movement for diverse and democratic media, and now is the time to start doing it.

If you want to support such a coalition contact freepress@cpbf.org.uk or ring 0208 521 5932.

CPBF supporters are asked to get their MPs to support John Grogan MP's EDM 309 on BSkyB and ITV which can be found on the Campaign's web site at: www.cpbf.org.uk You can also contact your MP via the CPBF web site. Further updates will also be posted on the site.

Press Complaints Commission widens its remit

By Nicholas Jones

In what is likely to become a highly significant widening of its remit, the Press Complaints Commission (PCC) has begun adjudicating on complaints about the content of video and audio material on newspaper websites.

Sir Christopher Meyer, the Commission's Chairman, has welcomed what he says is the opportunity to "plant the standard of self-regulation in the new and virgin field of the video and audio content" produced by press reporters.

On 6 November, in a speech to the annual conference of the Society of Editors in Glasgow Meyer thanked the industry for this latest vote of confidence in self-regulation.

The Commission has been considering complaints about the editorial content of newspaper websites since 1999 and Sir Christopher feared that if there had not been an extension to include audiovisual material, "god knows who might have moved in, it might have been something from the Government or the law courts".

The rapid spread of newspaper websites and the impact of their increasing audiovisual content dominated proceedings at the conference and prompted broadcasters to ask why they should continue to be controlled by a regulatory regime which forbids the kind of opinionated journalism which newcomers can deliver on the internet.

What also emerged was the prospect of far greater local competition for the best video and audio material with radio and television services having to come to terms with regular news bulletins on newspaper websites.

A vivid illustration of multi-media working in the future was provided by the editors of a regional daily and a local weekly. Three additional journalists have been hired by the *Newbury Weekly News* during the last 17 months to help gather and prepare video and audio material for a website, a five-minute daily news bulletin and weekend sports news. The *Hull Daily Mail*,

the first regional title to produce daily video news reports, now has 30 video journalists.

When asked how broadcasters could compete with a newspaper like the *Hull Daily Mail* when it beat them to audiovisual material on major stories, John Ryley, head of Sky News, said it was not only the speed of response but also the integrity of the journalism which would count. Nonetheless he said Sky News was looking into the possibility of "reaching further into the regions" in order to strengthen its local reporting.

The Hull Daily Mail, the first regional title to produce daily video news reports, now has 30 video journalists

When it came to the websites of national newspapers, Alan Rusbridger, Editor of *The Guardian*, believed greater editorial freedom would help them compete with radio and television. Although the BBC's video material would be far superior, the 600 journalists employed by the Guardian group would benefit from self regulation. "We don't have to be fair, impartial and balanced – and all that stuff – and that will give us some kind of advantage".

When it was put to the head of Sky News that established television correspondents like Jeremy Thompson were forbidden by the broadcasting regulations from delivering the provocative and opinionated journalism of columnists like Polly Toynbee and Jackie Ashley, Ryley was convinced it would be impossible to sustain different regulatory regimes for the websites of newspapers and broadcasting organisations.

"I think there will have to be a change in the regulations. Technology will batten down the law. New political websites like *18DoughtyStreet* are already breaking down the regulations".

No wonder Sir Christopher seemed so pleased that the PCC had made the running and brought newspaper websites within the orbit of self regulation. He felt adjudicating on audiovisual material was a logical extension of their work and would be accepted by the public. "I hope the knowledge that the product you are reading and now viewing comes under the codes of the Press Complaints Commission will be seen as a kind of kite mark".



Sir Christopher Meyer: pleased to have brought websites into the PCC's orbit

Business as usual at Ofcom

By Tom O'Malley

Ed Richards was appointed Chief Executive of Ofcom on 5 October. His appointment signals no change in Ofcom's pro-market neoliberal stance on broadcasting regulation.

At 42, Richards appears to have had little experience outside of the closed world of Westminster, the senior levels of the BBC and Ofcom.

He came to maturity during the Thatcher years and has clearly absorbed, with little public show of doubt, the stifling economic orthodoxies of those years where broadcasting is concerned.

He worked for Gordon Brown in the early 1990s, then for John Birt at the BBC, before working for Tony Blair on the 2001 election manifesto, and subsequently, as Blair's special advisor on media, telecoms, the internet and e-commerce.

He was a key figure in the shaping of the 2003 Communications Act, which set up Ofcom.

Since joining Ofcom in 2003 he has

been backing ideas about putting the BBC more firmly under Ofcom's control, and in promoting the public service publisher idea.

The latter was devised as a way of letting commercial public service broadcasters off the hook and putting large amounts of public money up for grabs by commercial companies.

To date Richards has devoutly promoted market pieties in communications. He has shown no public evidence of being able to understand or sympathise with alternative perspectives.

Mind you, if he had, he would never have worked for Blair or Ofcom, let alone got the top job.

It's business as usual then at Ofcom.

This appointment is yet another reason why we need to campaign for a radical change in the way communications are regulated.

That means getting rid of Ofcom and replacing it with a body that puts the public interest before commercial priorities in mass communications.



Ed Richards: market-friendly views

Ofcom backs no change on product placement

By Jonathan Hardy

The European Council has proposed that the thorny issue of product placement (PP) is best decided by national governments. Member States could opt-out from the stated principle of prohibition and allow PP in drama and entertainment genres.

This decision makes the result of Ofcom's recent consultation on product placement all the more important and interesting.

Ofcom has decided not to recommend changing the rules prohibiting broadcasters and programme makers from featuring products in programmes in return for payment or gain. It could not have made significant

changes until the new EC Audiovisual Directive alters rules prohibiting "surreptitious advertising". However, the consultation was clearly designed to prepare the ground for a speedy removal of the regulatory furniture. And that won't happen now in the way many commercial interests sought.

Victories, we know, are all too rare. So it's worth savouring this one, even if it does little more than hold the status quo.

As Ofcom's summary of the 67 respondents shows, there is considerable opposition from consumer and viewer groups to allowing product placement.

The CPBF argued that abandoning the principle of separation of editorial and advertising would create incentives to bypass advertising controls and would shred Ofcom's existing "undue prominence" rules.

So a victory, perhaps, but this is only a pause. The European Commission, for

instance, has just launched a public consultation on media literacy. On commercial communications, it states: "In this area, where valuable self-regulation already takes place, a number of different commercial strategies are used, such as product placement, sponsorship, direct marketing, data mining and branding across different media platforms."

The Commission goes on to ask for evidence of 'effective initiatives to help children and young people to acquire the necessary skills to decipher and evaluate advertising and other forms of commercial communication'.

It has long been a favoured industry argument to substitute "media literacy" for regulation, rather than seeing them work hand-in-hand to enhance individual and collective involvement in media decision-making.

The arguments in favour of product placement are weak and self-serving.

"Trust us to self-regulate" claims are undercut by calls for product placement in every genre, except news and current affairs.

Far from being a modest step up from "prop placement", permitting the trading of "brand presence" in programmes would systematically distort editorial agendas.

There is also a glaring contradiction in arguing that the regulatory framework cannot support the load of advancing media when so much effort is being expended on dynamiting its foundations.

And there is scant evidence that the public wants to trade in measures intended to protect artistic and editorial integrity for ad-fuelled content.

All proponents, and Ofcom, will want to proceed cautiously in rolling out PP, not least so that this hugely under-reported issue does not capture public attention in the same way its vociferous cousin junk food advertising has. Let's stay alert and noisy.

Beyond the veil

Recent events have thrown into sharp focus the way Islam and Muslims are portrayed by politicians and the British media. In October, Labour MP Jack Straw, ignited a fiery debate. He asked Muslim women attending his Blackburn surgery wearing veils covering their faces, (niqabs) to consider removing them to aid communication.

Mr Straw wrote in the *Lancashire Evening Telegraph* that he believed the wearing of niqabs was a "visible statement of separation and of difference" that made "positive relations" between British communities "more difficult".

His comments drew a furious response from many Islamic organisations that condemned him demonstrating a lack of understanding and placing Muslim women into a difficult position.

In November Nick Griffin, the Leader of the British National Party (BNP) was cleared of inciting racial hatred. The unanimous verdict was reached despite evidence collected during the filming of a BBC documentary that showed Griffin insulting Islam and the Koran.

Immediately after the verdict Lord Falconer, the Lord Chancellor, intimated that the laws on racial hatred might be strengthened. But some people believe Griffin's arrest was motivated by his right-wing politics and not his statements on Islam.

BBC executives have said they feel it would be inappropriate for a veiled woman to present the news. But, in December, Channel 4 announced its forthcoming alternative Christmas message will be given by a Muslim woman wearing a full-face veil.

Islam and Muslim women is a confused and contentious area. *Free Press* interviewed Dr Jamila Bchir and asked her for her thoughts on the subject.

Dr Bchir is an Iraqi lesbian feminist who taught sociology at the University of Baghdad in the 1980s.

She has been in the UK for the past three years researching attitudes to the intersection of religion and gender issues.

Free Press: Is Islam being accurately reported by British journalists?

Jamila Bchir: Many Arab women have suffered greatly – being sacked from jobs, beaten by male relatives, sometimes being murdered – to speak out against the patriarchal violence of Islam. Honour killings in Jordan and Egypt are daily occurrences. Last month a 15 year-old girl was hanged from an industrial crane in a small Iranian town in front of a complicit crowd of all-male onlookers. Stoning of women still occurs in Afghanistan and elsewhere.

Western journalists often broadcast information about it, but their editorial and "opinion" pieces are far less condemnatory than previously. Ten years ago feminists labelled all three monotheistic religions as ludicrous and oppressive. Now only non-religious bigotry can be easily condemned. Only a handful of journalists, including Polly Toynbee, have had the courage to describe themselves as Islamophobes.

Are radical Arab women like yourself "Islamophobic"?

The Islamicists' most brilliant tactical victory was to appropriate the language of victimhood. "Islamophobia" suggests a totally spurious analogy with "homophobia", which Western journalists have gone along with. Yes, we are proud to be called "Islamophobic" – but only as Jews, gays and gypsies, with the same logic, should be called "Naziphobes".

You have said that Western journalists have betrayed the cause of women. Could you expand on this?

Journalists are protective towards religion and especially Islam not because of their tolerance and integrity; it is fear, a reaction to the obsessive religious bandwagon

started by Blair and his ministers. Ten years ago it would have been impossible for a self-proclaimed reactionary Catholic, who has repeatedly refused to condemn church homophobia, to be a senior cabinet minister. Blunkett, Brown and Beckett all opposed equal rights for gay people in the

first three years of the administration, giving religious reasons. Newspapers give spectacularly excessive coverage to religious views and this month Archbishop Carey is included on a BBC4 *Planet Earth* - the *Future* panel otherwise made up entirely of professional ecologists.

You especially resent *The Independent's* Yasmin Alibai-Brown. Why?

She constantly implies that Islam is analogous to Christianity in having "moderate" and "extreme" wings; however,

there are no imams in any branch of Islam or in any mosque in the world who believe women are equal to men as legal witnesses or as enablers of divorce; no imams believe gay people are anything other than evil. This story of "moderate" Islam is simply a Blairite confection to keep ethnic minorities voting Labour.

What are your thoughts on the BNP/Nick Griffin trial and verdict?

What Griffin said about Islam is much milder than the calm outrage of Professor Richard Dawkins in his recent *The God Delusion*. He calls all three monotheisms "revengeful", "odious", "imbecile creeds" etc. But journalists rave about it and only go after yobs in pubs.

It's completely hypocritical. Griffin was only prosecuted because of his right-wing views, not because his words about religion were illegal. And of course there was no case to answer. Free speech is under serious threat from the left at the moment, just as it was from the right a few decades ago.



Where now for childrens TV?

Sue Tibbles reports on the 12th annual children's conference of Voice of the Listener and Viewer

Tony Robinson introduced the Voice of the Listener and Viewer's 12th Annual Children's Conference on 2 November with the rallying call: "The imagination of our children is at stake." He told the Oxford meeting that politicians know nothing about television and are hostile to it, due to working unsocial hours and rarely watching programmes.

He said everyone who was concerned about children's development and education via broadcasting needed to be involved in the campaign to save children's broadcasting and make the politicians, who are ultimately responsible, listen.

We heard views from BBC, independent channels, Ofcom and other

representatives, with a final session on how children's broadcasting can be saved.

One notable absence was ITV. Nobody from ITV was prepared to attend either this conference or any similar event since June 2006. However, a new campaign, Save Kids TV, has been launched to highlight the issues.

There were concerns that much of ITV's children's programming has been funded from the revenue generated by advertisements for "junk" food. It is feared that the loss of that income could deprive children of high-quality television, and leave no competition for the BBC.

Also the proposed move of the BBC to Manchester will have a huge impact on workers at the corporation and result in the loss of experienced people who do not wish to relocate.

The creator of the Teletubbies, Anne Wood, said there was still a climate of disapproval surrounding television, which is an easy scapegoat for many

social ills. She argued that there is a very cynical attitude to the world today and childhood is being tainted by consumerism and profit-making by multinational companies.

It was disgraceful, she said, that the National Television Awards had no children's television categories, and children children — who are protected in all other areas of life — have no protection in the cultural area.

Ideas for future campaigning included making a case to the Treasury, lobbying for better legislation than the current Communications Act, supporting tax credits for broadcasting and approaching a wider range of people including faith groups, trade unions, and individuals, so that the campaign would not be viewed as merely serving its own interests.

Related Links

Voice of the Listener and Viewer website:

www.vlv.org.uk

Save Kids' TV website:

www.savekidstv.org.uk

Reporting under occupation

By Sue Tibbles

The National Union of Journalists (Oxford) and Palestine Solidarity Campaign called this public meeting to highlight the importance of speaking out for the rights of media workers to do their jobs free of restrictions and intimidation.

The event, held in Oxford on 1 November, was prompted by the Coroner's Court verdict that ITN reporter Terry Lloyd had been unlawfully killed by US troops while covering the Iraq invasion in March 2003.

Caroline Hawley, a former BBC Baghdad correspondent, said that more than 150 journalists have been killed during the Iraq war and its aftermath.

Caroline felt that journalists were scared and frustrated by the problems they face in Iraq and, in particular, Baghdad.

Many Iraqis are fleeing to Syria and Jordan and due to the current situation; the future of the country seems grim.

Mohammed Daraghme, who reports from the Palestinian Territories for the respected London-based Arabic daily *Al-Hayat*, said: "Not only are journalists being killed but journalism itself is being killed."

He discussed the difficulties of travel within Palestine, the delays caused by checkpoints causing longer journeys which affect everyone, including journalists.

The internet and blogging are being used extensively in Palestine to overcome many obstacles to communication.

Although they cannot replace journalism completely, these blogs make valuable information and points of view available to a worldwide audience.

Some of the foreign media reporting from Palestine appear to have their own political agenda, so it is important to build trust — especially in a climate where politicians are not trusted.

It was suggested that the quality of reporting from Iraq and Palestine and the credibility of journalists would be enhanced if greater efforts were made to check facts.

There was also a concern that some journalists are inventing or embroidering their stories.

The meeting called for further campaigning work around these issues, for example, encouraging journalists to agree to abide by professional codes of conduct, writing to authorities and raising public awareness.



Terry Lloyd: inspiration for meeting



COURT REPORTING

Access all areas?

By Chris Frost

The Government is proposing changes in the way that access is provided for the media and the public to Family and Coroner Courts. At the moment, access to Family Courts is extremely limited. Reporters can only give names and address of the parties, a concise statement of charges, defences and counter-charges, submissions on points of law and the judgement.

A range of laws limits the media's ability to report on divorce and the care and custody of children, for example, the Administration of Justice Act 1960, The Domestic and Appellate Proceedings (Restriction of Publicity) Act 1968, the Family Act 1986, The Childrens Act 1989 and the Access to Justice Act 1999.

Partly this is to protect the privacy of children and families going through difficult times as marriages break up

and rows develop over the custody of children. But it is also, according to one important case, to protect the court in the "exercise of its paternal functions". Of course this means that much of what is covered cannot be spoken about after the case because it would be contempt of court.

The recent highly-publicised antics of groups such as Families Need Fathers and their Batman campaigners have led the Government to believe that more transparency is required in the Family Courts. A Department of Constitutional Affairs report says "... there is also a case for more openness, so that people can understand, better scrutinise decisions and have greater confidence".

Almost the reverse is happening in Coroner's Courts. Currently, the law allows reporters to attend the Coroner's Courts where inquests into deaths are carried out. These courts are set up to find out who the deceased was, how

when and where he met his death and the particulars to be registered. All inquests at the moment should be held in public (unless it is against the interests of National Security) and all evidence is public, unless the coroner agrees to take documentary evidence and rules that it does not need to be read out, limiting publication of things such as suicide notes.

The new Coroner Reform Bill, published in June and the first to be published in plain English, calls for new powers to impose reporting restrictions "in cases where no public interest would be served". The Bill's introduction says: "We also know of the additional grief and pain that can arise for bereaved people from making public personal details."

The Bill intends to give coroners the power to restrict reporting, particularly in cases of suicide or child deaths. Any interested person (including family or friends of the dead person) would be

able to make application to the Coroner for such restrictions or the coroner could decide it for him or herself.

A number of deaths, of course, are of major public interest and it must be a matter of concern that coroners will be able to limit the publication of an identity, making it difficult for the public and journalists to link inquests to particular cases of interest.

Suicide is an area likely to become private under the new Bill, yet many suicides, from those that happen in prison to the controversial Deepcut army barracks deaths, require investigation and their investigation should be public.

This is not a matter of mere prurience. Not knowing what is happening in our courts, public authorities and other services leads to the development of rumour and the distortion of our understanding of society and how it works.

Yet surprisingly, the Government seems to accept this argument in the case of reporting on the family. They plan to make these courts more transparent than they presently are, although reports of proceedings will often need to be anonymous and the reporting of details of settlements kept confidential.

The Government seems determined to go ahead with changes in the proceedings at family courts, making it clear that the status quo is not an option. It is concerned that children have become invisible in this process and their interests are not always best handled.

The Department of Constitutional Affairs (DCA) has been consulting on who should be able to attend such hearings, suggesting the media might have the right to attend courts (but not the public) with the courts retaining the power to exclude them if appropriate.

This raises the issues of who is a journalist, determining who will get access, and the nature of any exclusions and controls that journalists might face.

At the moment in UK law there are very few occasions that journalists are distinguished from the public. This is likely to become a significant issue with the growth of bloggers, citizen journalists and other forms of information dissemination. The Government is also consulting on who else might be allowed to attend, including MPs and local authority lead members.

But the plan for increased transparency is unpopular with the medical and social work professions, many of whom are concerned that this will limit their ability to work with families. Some members of the medical profession feel that more transparency risks people using the media to get their own way.

The new Coroner Reform Bill calls for new powers to impose reporting restrictions

This might include revealing confidential details, revealing the addresses of refuges and deterring witnesses.

Doctors and social workers claim their major problem is how to ensure the best interests of children and they are little concerned with the problems of the wider community or even the families, except where this impinges directly on children.

There is also a concern amongst some that more publicity could lead to fewer people being prepared to become expert witnesses. Some leading practitioners even feel that present coverage in other courts leaves expert witnesses too exposed.

Campaigners such as Families Need Fathers, while seeking more openness in the Family Courts, say that the proposals don't go far enough. The group's chair, John Baker, said: "The DCA still doesn't get it. It's not about 'perception' it's about quality control. Tinkering with perception will not restore confidence in the secret family courts."

The DCA's consultation period is now over but responses on its website show there is support for more transparency. One campaigner pointed out

that the importance of openness was not to let journalists into court – most would be too busy – but to allow parents to waive anonymity "and go to the press openly to complain about the treatment they received." The campaigner believed that any harm to the children (often new-born babies) from gossip was nothing compared to the harm caused by an unfair removal from the family.

On the discussion about the public attending, many were concerned that one party might bring large numbers of family or friends along for support. Even on the issue of privacy of identity, opinions were divided with some asking for anonymity and some seeking to be allowed to speak out.

The main problem is that at the moment, many feel gagged and want to speak out about what they see as injustice, from the courts or many of the professionals involved. Some campaigners said that justice must take precedence over privacy with parents who face injustice being allowed to speak out.

The points raised in the consultation show there are some fundamental issues arising out of the family courts handing of cases that need to be addressed and that this, by itself, requires more transparency.

This is the line the NUJ has taken in its response to the DCA. The Government is now considering the responses but has not issued a date for

Media makeover



REMAKING MEDIA: THE STRUGGLE TO DEMOCRATISE PUBLIC COMMUNICATION
Robert A. Hackett and William K. Carroll
Routledge £18.99

By Tom O'Malley

Why do people organise to challenge and change the media? The answers, according to Robert Hackett and William Carroll in *Remaking Media*, range from the desire to have their voices heard, make the invisible visible, correct the distortions of the mass media and aid a wider transformation of society.

This book discusses some of the groups which developed in the last 30 years in the UK, Canada and the USA and proceeded to take on the media in many different ways. They include the

Canadian CPBF, Vancouver Co-op Radio, the US-based Media Alliance and Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR) and the United Kingdom's CPBF.

The first three chapters deal with theoretical issues. They outline how the media in these countries have failed to support democratic values, discuss the nature of social movements and explore the political assumptions that underpin much media activism. Subsequent chapters focus more closely on case studies of the CPBF, the Media Alliance and activists in Canada, particularly Vancouver.

The range and energy of these groups such comes across very powerfully in the book. If such organisations did not already exist it would be necessary to invent them. *Remaking Media* provides a useful and thoughtful audit of what all this work means now and what it could mean in the future. It is also clear that these organisations need to continue making sustained efforts to promote a more democratically accountable, diverse media and thereby help to build better, more just and open societies. Hackett and Carroll's book is a valuable contribution to this task.

Fighting back for freedom

By Julie-ann Davies

The Campaign for Freedom of Information (CFOI) has submitted a formal response to the Department for Constitutional Affairs regarding proposed changes to the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA).

Additionally the campaign is encouraging members of the public to sign an online petition urging the Government to reject the proposals.

Three major changes are being discussed. The first is the introduction of a standard fee for all requests. At the moment, applications made under the FOIA are processed without charge.

Applicants can be requested to pay for photocopying charges but not for the time taken to gather the information, provided that the cost for this falls below the limit. (£600 for Government departments, £450 for other public bodies.)

There are widespread concerns that introducing standardised application charges will prevent many, especially those on low incomes, from accessing information under the Act.

The second proposal is to aggregate the costs of multiple requests made by a single applicant and refuse those applications if their combined cost

exceeds the limit. This can already be done with different requests made by the same applicant on the same subject but it is proposed to extend this to also cover requests made on different subjects.

This could further limit access to the Act by the public, journalists, media outlets and campaigning organisations.

Thirdly, it is proposed that the cost limit should take into account the amount of time taken by officials and civil servants to consider requests.

This could present an insurmountable obstacle to complicated or "sensitive" requests – as the time taken in merely debating such applications could be enough to raise costs past the prescribed limit.

Additionally, this proposal provides a golden opportunity for those wishing to circumvent the legislation and avoid releasing information.

Clearly, if passed, these changes will impact severely on the amount of information released under the auspices of the Act and limit public access.

Maurice Frankel, Director of CFOI, told *FreePress*: "The Government's proposals would severely undermine the Freedom of Information Act as a tool for holding Government to account.

"Any complex, probing or potential-

ly contentious request would be likely to be refused simply because the time needed to consider the issues involved could be taken into account in future.

"Once this exceeded a set limit, they could refuse to process the request, regardless of the public interest in the subject.

"The public would get less information and Government will be shielded from scrutiny.

"The Government is also planning to allow authorities to add together the costs of all requests made to it by the same organisation or individual and refuse them if their combined cost exceeds the cost limit.

"In practice this would limit the press, campaigners and others to perhaps just one request per quarter to a Government department or authority – preventing any kind of systematic monitoring or scrutiny of decisions.

"These proposals are an attempt to neuter the Freedom of Information Act, and we hope people will not only sign the online petition but ask their MPs to oppose these changes."

The petition can be found at petitions.pm.gov.uk/freeinformation and further information and updates are available on the Campaign for Freedom of Information's website. www.cfoi.org.uk

Free Press is edited by Julie-ann Davies on behalf of the National Council

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