

FREE Press

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The long march to press freedom

By **Tim Gopsill**

In May this year I spent a week in Shanghai. Enthralling as this new age city is I spent much of the time watching TV. Sad lonely foreigner in a hotel room? Not so. This was just after the earthquake in Sichuan and some channels were broadcasting live from the scene around the clock. It made some of the most gripping TV I have ever seen.

Chinese media, for all their expanding freedom, are still state-owned and in the immediate aftermath of the quake editors were instructed to restrain their reporting and follow the orders of officials on the ground. But when crews started filming and sending back sensational footage, more and more ignored the instructions and set off for Sichuan.

The authorities quickly cottoned on to what was happening. The day after the quake Prime Minister Wen Biao went to the epicentre and stayed for

days. He got himself filmed in casual clothes clambering over piles of rubble, talking through walls to people who were trapped, holding hands and chatting with those who had been rescued and consoling the relatives of those who had died.

Two days later the President of China, Hu Jintao himself, joined in, and a signal was given to the media that they could work without direction. Now there was non-stop live coverage of the increasingly desperate struggle to find survivors.

Obviously I could not understand a word, but one scene that stuck in the mind was a hospital interview with a young woman who had been dragged from the ruins. Although now in safety she was still clinging desperately to the tunic of the soldier who had lifted her out; she just would not let go. When the broadcast returned to the studio the suave young male presenter was in tears.

Meanwhile, the world was waiting to watch the Olympics and the western media were keen to report not just the Games but human rights abuses and official unpleasantness of all kinds. To pacify them the Chinese had announced a "Service Guide for Foreign Media" that guaranteed that they would be able to travel freely and conduct interviews with any consenting Chinese citizens.

Some western correspondents nevertheless had problems. ITN's Beijing correspondent John Ray was roughed up and detained while covering a Free Tibet protest. "The Chinese authorities have fallen well short of promises made about complete press freedom during the Games," he said. The Foreign Correspondents Club of China (FCCC) received more than 30 confirmed cases of harassment, including assaults and damage to equipment or the deletion of images. The FCCC said there were many more non-confirmed cases. Several jour-

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Regulation



Should the internet be regulated?

Campaigners for internet freedom fear that any form of regulation, will be the first step towards censorship. **Nicholas Jones** launches his blog on the CPBF website – www.cpbf.org.uk – by warning that self-regulation will have some serious downsides

If the September CPBF meeting is any guide, internet regulation is a hot topic among media freedom campaigners and it was agreed the CPBF would work to encourage a wider debate.

Of particular concern are the activities of the Internet Watch Foundation which monitors the web for illegal online content and has triggered the first prosecution under the 1959 Obscene Publications Act for pornographic material on the internet. In a statement, explaining the background to what will be a test case affecting potential censorship of the internet, the Crown Prosecution Service said it was alerted last year by the Internet Watch Foundation which had discovered what it considered was an obscene blog on a fantasy website. The case was investigated by Scotland Yard and is due to be heard at Newcastle Crown Court in late October. Although the blog's website is hosted in a foreign country, the prosecution has been able to go ahead because the alleged author was identified as a British citizen living in the UK.

Those who argue for an unregulated free-for-all on the internet are in danger of becoming cheerleaders for Rupert Murdoch, the Conservative Party and other multi-national businesses anxious to exploit the web's commercial potential.

Newspaper websites are now moving into internet television and the ability of media proprietors to buy exclusive audio-visual material is enticing viewers away from mainstream broadcasters and undermining their viability.

A greater threat is posed by the gradual demolition of the traditions of the UK's public service broadcasting. The hallmark of British political reporting on radio and television – on the BBC, ITV, Sky News etc – has been political impartiality.

Organisations like the CPBF must face up to the danger of allowing regulation to be so light-touch that media monopolies will be able to use internet television services to exploit media convergence and reconfigure the

broadcasting industry to their advantage.

Rupert Murdoch is keen to introduce Fox News-style broadcasting to Britain. So far, he has been thwarted because Ofcom and the Government have defended the need for political impartiality. But – to the great advantage of Murdoch and other media proprietors – the regulators have turned a blind eye to the internet allowing a free-for-all for newspaper websites which are investing heavily in online television reporting. Their highly-partisan coverage of politics is a pointer to the future.

Britain has long been proud of a democratic settlement that encourages a free press but regulates broadcasting, especially during elections in order to ensure impartiality and a degree of access even for minority parties.

Measures designed to enable free and fair voting include the safeguard that when polling stations are open, broadcasting should be politics free. There are no such restraints on newspaper websites and their video reporting continued unchecked while voting was taking place in recent parliamentary by-elections and council elections. Their coverage was highly partisan and included interviews with candidates.

In a discussion document published in March 2008, the Conservative Party said the rules on political impartiality on radio and television should be relaxed for organisations not in receipt of public funds or subsidies. Regulators were urged to lift regulations which stifled creativity and diversity.

I am all in favour of the widest possible access to the internet but while arguing for the greatest diversity, the Conservatives should not be allowed to get away with their assertion that newspapers monopolies should be free to become unregulated broadcasters because they are “not in receipt of public funds or subsidies”.

In fact Britain's national newspapers do enjoy considerable benefits including a zero rating for value added tax. In addition they have

Regulation

privileged access and get preferential treatment when it comes to the distribution of state information.

In return for the status they have been afforded, they do have responsibilities and if they seek to use their websites to broadcast during election campaigns they should respect established practices.

Therefore I would propose a ban on online television reporting by newspapers on polling day. What is the justification for not insisting that the audio-visual output of their websites should fall into line with television and radio services? British newspapers are highly politicised; their proprietors flaunt their political influence and patronage. Do campaigners for media freedom want to give these monopolies an even bigger platform and even greater opportunities to manipulate political coverage?

Perhaps there might even be a case for some kind of restraint on online television reporting of politics in the period running up to an election. Should there be some degree of guaranteed access for smaller minority parties? Perhaps they could get airtime along the lines of the existing arrangement for election broadcasts based on the number of candidates being fielded.

Online political advertising poses another quandary. US-style attack advertisements are already appearing on political websites. Will these online tv ads be given free rein on newspaper websites?

Organisations like the CPBF can either join Ofcom and the Government in turning a blind eye or start a debate. Online television reporting of politics is an ideal starting point: Will it be a Trojan horse and allow the likes of Murdoch to introduce partisan political broadcasting by the back door?

As a first step I would like to propose that the audio-visual reporting of politics by newspaper websites should be monitored during the run-up and on polling day in the 2009 European Parliamentary elections. We could then assess whether we should be demanding safeguards for the long build-up to the likely 2010 general election.

Public service broadcasting in peril

By Megan Dobney

The forthcoming Office of Communications (Ofcom) review makes the next few months critical for the future of public services broadcasting (PSB) in the UK.

With this in mind, SERTUC, through our Creative and Leisure Industries Committee, will jointly (with the CPBF) be hosting a conference on the 15 November on the future of public service broadcasting.

We view it as a requirement for a successful civil society to maintain high-quality public service broadcasting, both at national and regional level. In particular, a public sector broadcasting service free from the dominance of the shareholder perspective with programming determined by advertisers' preferences. Public service broadcasting is a political and cultural service too important to be left to the whims of the market.

PSB is not just about news and current affairs. It's also about education and entertainment with programmes that challenge preconceptions on the issues of the day, whether political or cultural. PSB in both TV and radio should be about helping us make informed decisions that underwrite and enhance a democratic society.

The TUC in its submission to Ofcom's second review said: "We recognise too the value of all the components of public service broadcasting: informing our understanding of the world; stimulating knowledge and learning; reflecting UK cultural identity; and representing diversity and alternative viewpoints. We also value the distinctive characteristics: that such broadcasting should be high-quality, original, innovative, challenging, engaging and widely available.

"It is increasingly clear that programming with these values will not be produced as a result of market forces alone. This is confirmed by the lack of original high quality drama on the increasing number of channels that do not have a public broadcasting obligation; the decline in production of high-quality children's television outside the BBC; and the decline in regional news outside the BBC."

The TUC submission goes to say: "The TUC shares the widely held concerns about the current threat to public service broadcasting. We would categorise these as follows:

- The decline of ITV and threat to its distinctive position in British broadcasting as a result of the growth of digital channels and the forecast that the PSB costs might exceed benefits for ITV plc by 2012, a particular factor in this is the decline in regional news services.
- The forecast move of Channel 4 into deficit
- The growing dominance of large independent production companies as main producers of public service content
- The absence of any competition to BBC in children's television
- The failure of the digital channels to produce any high-quality drama

- The pressure on BBC finances from below-inflation licence fee settlement

- The current digital divide between those with access to the 'new' channels and those who rely on the 'free to air' channels."

The above was written in early July 2006. Sadly, we are already seeing cuts and the merging of two ITV regional news programmes, redundancies in ITV's regional news provision (and this even before Ofcom has reported), along with the relocation of some BBC broadcasting out of London. We also have, potentially, the European Commission banning the government's proposed £14m aid to Channel 4 to help the move to digital and to fulfil its public service broadcasting commitments. Our conference comes at a time that the industry is facing many challenges. These will be far-reaching and impact not only on workers in the industry but also on the general public, as well as on the quality, choice and accessibility of public service broadcasting.

SERTUC covers London, the South East and East of England, from Norwich through London to Southampton, with over 2 million trade unionists and their families, covering every sector of the economy. The provision of public service broadcasting in the SERTUC region with both national and regional broadcasting, is a very real issue and important to the quality of life in the Greater South East. SERTUC recognises the importance that PSB brings in terms of high skill and good quality jobs and the contribution this make to the economy of the region.

Thus, the conference is not only aimed at those working in the industry but also those who use, or are looking to be employed in, broadcasting in the future. It is aimed at those in the industry, trade unionists from BECTU, NUJ, Unite, Equity and the Writers Guild, media campaigners and user groups, students of the media and academics, users such as teachers and parents, trade unionists in the SERTUC region, and those who just want to see high quality PSB.

The conference will cover the funding of Public Service Broadcasting; training and skills; Ofcom; equality and diversity; the role of PSB in education, and international PSB. There will also be a session on the growth of the internet and its use in setting the political agenda, especially from the right. There will be keynote speakers from the media, trade unions and academics, as well as workshops.

The conference is free and lunch and refreshments will be provided. You are invited to join us – but registration is essential. If you want to come along, between 10am and 4pm, to Congress House, Great Russell Street, London WC1B 3LS, then email sertucevents@tuc.org.uk to register.

Megan Dobney, is regional secretary of SERTUC, the the TUC in London, the South East, and East of England

COMMENTING

This article below was sent to the *Guardian's* Comment is Free website by Greg Philo, a noted media academic who has worked with the Glasgow University Media Group, which has been Britain's foremost media research unit for more than 20 years.

The article was rejected by editor Matt Seaton on the grounds that "it would be read as a piece of old lefty whingeing about bias." It certainly is a piece of left-wing criticism of the deficiencies of the commercial media, yes – but can't Comment is Free (CiF) embrace such a thing?

CiF was started by the *Guardian* as a great leap online, using the paper's extensive internet presence to expand its opinion pages into an open forum. Dozens of people with a range of political viewpoints were offered the chance to send short debate pieces for readers to comment on.

But it seems there has been a tightening of the remit, with two other recent accusations of censorship at CiF. An Iranian woman in London, writing under the nom de plume of Soraya Tehrani, has been banned from contributing to CiF following a campaign by right-wing pro-Israel voices.

She had been invited to make a post on how the Afghan war has exacerbated the drugs problem in Iran; apparently it contained nothing offensive to anyone and is still on the site. But David T (Toube), an aggressive neo-con blogger on the right-wing site Harry's Place, complained to the *Guardian* about allegedly anti-Semitic comments she had made to earlier CiF discussions, and CiF responded by announcing she was to be banned from any posting in future. Seaton wrote an apologetic email to David Toube assuring him it wouldn't happen again.

"Soraya Tehrani" had certainly expressed hostility to the state of Israel, and to the USA's support for it, in fairly forthright terms, but her comments were not racial – unless it is anti-Semitic simply to criticise Israel, of course.

Then CiF took down a post by Medialens, a pair of media academics who specialise in meticulous criticism of the liberal media, from the left. Medialens – David Cromwell and David Edwards – commented on an article by *Guardian* feature writer Emma Brockes on emotional fakery in American politics.

The pair referred back to an instance in

which Emma Brockes had been accused of faking a quote in an interview with the radical American academic and commentator Noam Chomsky three years ago. The affair caused quite a stir on the radical left, as Medialens supporters bombarded the *Guardian* with furious emails in outrage that anybody might traduce their idol.

Emma Brockes had attempted to make fun of Noam Chomsky – not a bad idea, but a risky one. In the process she distorted what he said on the Srebrenica massacre in Bosnia by the way she quoted him, to make it look as if he was denying it had taken place, and her article was removed from the website after the protests.

Seizing another chance to have a go at her, Medialens put up a post reminding readers of her own fakery in 2005. CiF took it down, and Seaton wrote to explain that her new article had been about the exploitation of faked emotion in politics, not faked reporting, and that the post was not relevant to that discussion.

No doubt CiF had its reasons for taking down all these items, but that is not the point. Comment is Free is supposed to be just that, open to all shades of comment and opinion – and especially, we might have hoped, with the dearth of outlets for radical or socialist opinion in contemporary media, to opinion on the left.

Greg Philo's article has been slightly edited for publication.
Tim Gopsill

More news, less views

by Greg Philo

News is a procession of the powerful. Watch it on TV, listen to the Today programme and marvel at the orthodoxy of views and the lack of critical voices.

When the credit crunch hit, we were given a succession of bankers, stockbrokers and even hedge-fund managers to explain and say what should be done. But these were the people who had caused the problem, thinking nothing of taking £20bn a year in city bonuses.

The solution these free market wizards agreed to, was that tax payers should stump up £50bn (and rising) to fill up the black holes in the banking system. Where were the critical voices to say it would be a better idea to take the bonuses back?

Mainstream news does sometimes have a social-democratic edge. There are complaints aired about fuel poverty and the state of inner cities. But there are precious few voices making the point that the reason why there are so many poor people is because the rich have taken the bulk of the dispos-

NEW CPBF PUBLICATION: APPEAL FOR FUNDS

To commemorate the epic year-long struggle by the miners in 1984-85 the CPBF will be publishing *Shafted: The Media, the Miners' Strike and the Aftermath*, edited by Granville Williams, for the twenty-fifth anniversary of the start of the strike. Contributors will cover both media coverage during the strike, including alternative media, photography and cartoons. Others will look at film and documentary programmes which capture the devastation wrought in mining communities as pits closed. The current controversy around "clean coal" and the environment is also examined. Photos, cartoons and other material will also be included.

Contributors include Steve Bell, Nicholas Jones, Hilary Wainwright, Paul Routledge, Tony Harcup, Pete Lazenby, Patricia Holland and Julian Petley. The book will be on sale for £8.99 but we will also have a special offer for CPBF members. Details in the next issue of Free Press.

We also plan to hold public meetings and put material on a website to launch the book. All of this costs money (something the CPBF is always short of). The project will cost £4,000 and we are appealing to our members and supporters for funding. Please send donations to the CPBF National Office indicating it is for the miners' book appeal.

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able wealth. The notion that the people should own the nation's resources is derided on orthodox news.

When Northern Rock was nationalised, TV news showed us pictures of the former carmaker British Leyland, nationalised when it went bust in the 1970s. Never mind that it was privately owned when the problems occurred and that company policy had been to distribute 95 per cent of profits as dividends to shareholders, rather than to invest in new plant and machinery.

This is all lost in the mists of history and what is conveyed is the vague sense that nationalisation is a "bad thing".

The Glasgow Media group (GMG) showed how this affects public understanding by asking a sample of 244 young people in higher education (aged 18–23) about the great spate of privatisations, which had taken place in the 1980s. We asked whether the industries involved had been profitable or unprofitable. Actually, the major ones of gas, electricity, oil and telecommunications were both profitable and major sources of revenue to the state, but nearly 60 per cent of the sample thought that the industries had been losing money.

This is especially poignant now that energy prices are being jacked up and the foreign owners of many of these companies are not interested in passing on their windfall profits to the British people.

Where are the critical voices, given space to raise arguments for the public ownership of crucial industries?

At the start of the Iraq war we had the normal parade of generals and military experts, but in fact, a consistent body of opinion then and since has been completely opposed to it. We asked our sample whether prominent critics of the war should be featured routinely on the news as part of a normal range of opinion – 73 per cent opted for this.

The Israeli/Palestinian conflict is another area of great imbalance in the views that are heard. Our study of the main TV news output showed that pro-Israeli speakers were featured twice as much as Palestinians. This year BBC news covered Israel's "birthday", with 60 years since the setting up of the state. This was of course also the anniversary of what, from the

Palestinian perspective, was the great disaster when they were forced from their homes and land.

Israel's superior public relations machine meant that they set the agenda on broadcast news. The Palestinians were featured as a sort of afterthought. As a presenter on BBC's *Today* programme put it, "Today Israel is 60 years old, and all this week we have been hearing from Israelis about

what it means to them". The GMG commissioned YouGov to ask a sample of 2,086 UK adults whether they thought that more coverage should be given to the Israeli point of view, or more to the Palestinians, or equal for both. The bulk of the replies (72 per cent) were that both should have the same. Only 5 per cent of the population supported what the broadcasters have actually been doing in their main news output.

Politicians and broadcasters say they are worried about a growing lack of interest in politics especially amongst the young. Our work shows there is no lack of interest in lively critical debate. The problem is that news which largely features the views of two political parties with very similar free market policies at home, and an international agenda that follows America, does not provide it.

MEPs defend media pluralism

Media pluralism must be safeguarded and all citizens should have access to free media, MEPs underlined in a resolution adopted in the European Parliament on Thursday 25 September. To prevent owners, shareholders or governments from interfering with editorial content, MEPs advocated the creation of editorial charters. They also want an open discussion of the status of blogs.

The European Parliament adopted a resolution by 307 votes to 262 which urged the commission and the member states to safeguard media pluralism and ensure that all EU citizens can access free and diversified media. The resolution was a revised version of an earlier report drafted by the Estonian centre-left MEP Marianne Mikko and the European committee on culture and education.

In the resolution, MEPs stressed the need to ensure journalistic and editorial independence and suggested editorial charters to prevent owners, shareholders or outside bodies such as governments from interfering with news content. To shed light over the aims and background of the broadcasters and publishers, the resolution also encourages the disclosure of ownership of all media outlets. MEPs also voiced concerns over the media's ability to carry out the role of a watchdog of democracy, when private media enterprises are motivated by financial profit, and warned that this could lead to loss of diversity. The resolution considered that competition law and media law should be interlinked to avoid conflicts between media ownership

concentration and political power.

Blogs represented an important new contribution to freedom of expression and were often used by both media professionals and private persons. Therefore MEPs want an open discussion on all issues relating to the status of blogs. On this point the resolution is slightly different from the proposal from the committee on culture and education, that suggested a "clarification" of the status of blogs and sites based on user-generated content, assimilating them for legal purposes with any other form of public expression.

During the presentation of the report, Marianne Mikko responded to the concerns of many bloggers: "My entrance into cyberspace has created rapid reaction among a lot of bloggers. I shall make it clear now that nobody is interested in regulating the internet," she said.

MEPs also underlined the importance of the protection of copyrights online, insisting that third parties have to mention the source when taking over declarations, call for greater transparency with respect to personal data kept on users by search engines, email providers and social networking sites. Mikko was also concerned that while print and online journalists in various countries are restricted by slander and libel legislation, the status of bloggers as reporters was unclear.

The culture committee's original report published in June may be found at: www.europarl.europa.eu/news/expert/infopress_page/039-30532-154-06-23-906-20080602IPR30531-02-06-2008-2

ITV slashes Welsh services

By Tom O'Malley

The spin was perfect. On 25 September Ofcom published its latest thoughts on public service broadcasting – the public service broadcasting review. It signalled then – as it had done many times before – that it accepted ITV's case that its news and non-news programming in Wales was too costly.

Five days later ITV announced that 17 of its 130 staff in Wales would lose their jobs. This was part of UK-wide package involving the making 429 out of 1,075 staff redundant.

Ofcom, as it has done consistently since it was set up in 2003, provided regulatory cover for ITV's withdrawal from its public service obligations.

But ITV is a major player in UK broadcasting, and is fast positioning itself for a successful future in the era after digital switchover. What is at stake here is a view that says ITV's priority should be to make profits rather than provide a full range of public service programmes.

In Wales the response has been sharp. Peter Black, the Liberal Democrat AM said: "Cutting jobs in Wales will ... make it more difficult for people living in Wales to get information about politics and current affairs in their own country."

Even the Tory leader in the Assembly, Nick Bourne complained of how the "plans, along with recent cuts in the Welsh newspaper industry, have damaging consequences for the reporting of news and current affairs across a wide range of publications and broadcasters."

The issues were flagged, in advance of the announcement at the first ever NUJ fringe meeting at Plaid Cymru's Annual

Conference in Aberystwyth on September 11. Meic Birtwistle, joint NUJ executive member for Wales took the chair. Speakers included Alun Fred Jones, AM, the Assembly heritage minister, Hywel Williams MP of the NUJ's parliamentary group, Leanne Woods AM and Pete Murray vice-president of the NUJ.

It was a well-attended meeting. All the speakers, including this writer who was there for the CPBF, registered their deep concern at the direction of broadcasting in Wales. The issue of ITV's future was raised time and time again. Nerys Evans AM, who sat in on the meeting, and had been a member of the Assembly's 2008 broadcasting committee, later responded pointedly to ITV's proposals: "I call on ITV to explain how they will adequately represent the people of Wales in their output following these cutbacks."

Secretary of state, Andy Burnham, is aware of this pressure coming from politicians around the UK. On 6 October he said: "I think we are all united in saying that we want strong regional output with a range of voices – more than one company providing it – in future, and I will talk to all broadcasters, ITV included, about those very issues in the months ahead."

The Government has jettisoned its commitment to allowing under-regulation in banking in the UK. It did so because events proved that this policy led to disaster. The cuts in ITV are just one further example of the disaster that a similar policy in broadcasting has produced. Ofcom must be replaced by a regulator committed to public service communications. It is our job as a campaign to push for a new policy, one that will benefit the people of Wales and the whole of the UK.

Murdoch is waiting for ITV to go down the pan

We need to oppose BSkyB taking an even bigger share of the broadcasting pie, says Granville Williams

Where did it all go wrong with ITV? Shares have fallen 66 per cent in the last year and, with a market value of £1.4bn, the company has now been pushed out of the FTSE 100.

Ray Fitzwalter, formerly head of current affairs at Granada, has written a timely book, *The Dream That Died: The Rise and Fall of ITV*, which deserves to be widely read. He argues that the unique qualities of ITV were based on the regional franchises which meant that "ideas, concerns and talent outside London found a voice and often a national and international platform". Now ITV is no longer regional, and the low standard of programming means that "the public are bored, the advertisers unimpressed and the share price low". And the reasons for ITV's decline? He argues that ITV "was hollowed out to the detriment of broadcasting as a whole while successive Governments lacking in courage and vision, and the City, concerned with its own short term interests, stood by until it was too late".

At the end of September ITV announced 1,000 job losses, 429 of the 1,000 people working in regional news are to go, saving £40m. A further 500 people are going from other parts of ITV, and further cuts in the IT department are expected. But it is the slashing of jobs in regional news and programming (cut from five and a half

Spin uncovered

SPINNING THE WHEELS: A GUIDE TO THE UK PR AND LOBBYING INDUSTRY

This new booklet published by SpinWatch provides a snapshot of an industry that prefers to stay out of the limelight. It documents the tactics used by leading PR and public affairs companies on issues such as nuclear power, science, food and local government. It then takes you on a tour of leading PR companies, think tanks and corporate-unded science organisations.

Spinning the Wheels also gives an insight into lobbying, a sub-sector of the PR industry. It argues that while lobbying is a legitimate activity, the majority is undertaken by, or on behalf of, industry.

By examining the links between personnel in lobbying consultancies and politics in the UK, it reveals the enormous disparity in access and influence between the business interests able to afford their services and those lobbying in the not-for-profit sector.

The booklet was launched on 22 September at a fringe event at the Labour Party conference. It featured a debate on transparency in lobbying and whether rules should be introduced to open up lobbying activity to more public scrutiny.

You can either download a copy for free or order a hard copy from the SpinWatch bookshop. More information: www.spinwatch.org/-articles-by-category-mainmenu-8/40-pr-industry/5176-spinning-the-wheels-a-guide-to-the-pr-and-lobbying-industry

ITV



ITV boss Michael Grade: key role in the destruction of ITV

hours a week to three hours forty-five minutes) which prompted an angry response from the media unions and viewers as they became aware of the proposed changes – for example, 16,000 people voiced their opposition to the changes at Border. Distinct ITV news regions are being amalgamated - Border with Tyne Tees, West with West Country and Meridian with Thames Valley – in what is a clear retreat from public service obligations by ITV. The scale of the cuts is demonstrated with the Border/Tyne Tees amalgamation. The Tyne Tees newsroom employs 104 people, Border 64. The new service in the merged region will operate with 77 people.

Michael Grade, ITV's executive chairman, has played a key role in this demolition. He wants complete freedom from what he sees as the millstone of public service broadcasting (PSB) obligations. But the role of regulator Ofcom in the dismantling of ITV's PSB remit is deeply problematical. In the recently published second public service broadcasting review it accepted ITV's case and gave the green light for the cuts in regional news and programmes. This was in spite of important research findings contained in the document which found that 9 out of 10 people do not want the BBC to be the only provider of public service content. A high value is placed on PSB programming which complements the BBC and three quarters of the people

interviewed would pay on average £3.50 per month for PSB services on ITV, Channel 4 and Five. Also a majority of people want ITV 1 to provide regions and nations with news to complement the BBC. So why has Ofcom allowed ITV to do exactly the opposite of what their research identifies as the public interest?

Meanwhile ITV's status as an independent media group is uncertain. The attempt by Virgin Media to take over ITV was scuppered by the 17.9 per cent stake which BSkyB acquired for £940m in late 2006. The subsequent appeal by ITV and Virgin Media led the competition commission to rule that BSkyB must reduce its holding to 7.5 per cent. BSkyB's subsequent appeal against this decision has now been rejected and speculation is growing that if BSkyB is forced to sell all of

'A majority of people want ITV 1 to provide regions and nations with news to complement the BBC. So why has Ofcom allowed ITV to do exactly the opposite of what their research identifies as the public interest?'

its stake (it would mean a loss of £650m based on ITV's current share price) an attempt to take over ITV will be made. However there are still two unresolved aspects. BSkyB may make another appeal on the ruling, and Virgin's argument that the competition commission failed to take sufficient account of media plurality has also been accepted. The competition appeal tribunal may conclude that selling down BSkyB's stake in ITV to 7.5 per cent will not be enough to ensure media plurality.

Over the next year an alarming scenario may open up. One of the strongest contenders to take over ITV is the Luxembourg-based group RTL which is owned by one of the biggest global media groups, Bertelsmann. The Mohn family, which controls Bertelsmann, has a £1bn fund to use for European acquisitions. However RTL owns the UK television channel Five and one rumour is that RTL would be prepared to hand over Five to BSkyB in return for its ITV stake. The 2003 Communications Act specifically allows BSkyB to acquire channel Five but we need to remember that under the ownership rules in the same act BSkyB was also allowed to own up to 20 per cent of ITV!

If this ownership battle does unfold we will see again very powerful opposition, based on public interest grounds, to the increased dominance of BSkyB over UK media.

News

Freedom video

By Barry White

Reel News is an activist video collective, set up to publicise and share information on inspirational campaigns and struggles – not just in this country, but across the world. Initially they are doing this through producing a monthly newsreel, made up of a number of videos short enough to use in union and campaign meetings.

The Current edition (No 15) features an NUJ commissioned film "Press Freedom: Collateral Damage" which highlights the ever-increasing levels of intimidation and harassment of photographers and journalists covering demonstrations, public order incidents and dissent, by the police (also see Shooting the Messengers by Larry Herman, Free Press 165). The film shows assaults by police on journalists who are quite clearly being targeted by the police Forward Intelligence Team and the protests by the NUJ and photographers earlier this year outside Scotland Yard.

The video also includes coverage of the Heathrow climate camp, where the police went out of their way to make journalists' lives as difficult as possible. You can find out more about Reel News by visiting their web site at: www.reelnews.co.uk and you can take out a standing order for a minimum of £3 a month for a copy of their monthly news video.

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nalists complained they were followed and photographed by officials.

And of course they encountered the continual blocking of sensitive websites, though it transpired that on this the International Olympic Committee (IOC) had collaborated with the authorities. The head of the IOC press commission, Kevan Gosper, admitted to journalists that IOC officials had "negotiated with the Chinese that some sensitive sites would be blocked on the basis they were not considered Games-related."

Nevertheless, the Special Service Guide did allow much freer reporting than hitherto, and foreign journalists were waiting with interest to see what would happen when its terms expire on October 17. The general expectation was that the relaxed approach would be maintained.

Chinese journalists have been watching all this with their own special interest. They have acquired the taste for free reporting, that once acquired does not go away.

The Sichuan earthquake was a more important step towards independent journalism in China than the Olympics, much as western journalists and politicians alike may like to think that their own pressure had had an effect.

Chen Tao of the All-China Journalists Association (ACJA, still party-controlled but the nearest thing China has to a journalists' union) believes its rulers have accepted the need to move towards media freedom. "Chinese journalists now are enjoying more and more freedom," he says. "I think the government has already learned that it's impossible

to control media. The Olympics only speeded up this progress." Even John Ray agrees that China has realised it must relax media restrictions. "I've been in China for two years, and it's true: it is lots easier than before," he says.

There have, in fact, been experiments in liberalisation in the economically liberal areas like Shenzhen and Chongqing, where newspapers have been operating commercially for some years. The Xinhua state news agency, once a Tass-style government mouthpiece, now follows international news values, with its journalists receiving training in the UK.

Ma Guihua is a London-based reporter for Xinhua. She too believes China is moving forward because it needs to, not because of western pressure: "The media in China is not static – it is changing and progressing all the time. TV programmes now invite open discussion of how China should move forward."

Criticism of officials is tolerated and local regional journalists have started to flex their muscles and investigate corruption and hold local officials and managers to public account.

But the future is up to Chinese journalists. They are learning that press freedom cannot be gifted by the state but has to be fought for, and the dramatic events of 2008 have given them a great boost. As the ACJA's Chen Tao says: "China is developing in every aspect, including media freedom. Maybe sometimes you may see some problems, but believe me, my friend, tomorrow will be better."

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

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