

FREE Press

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Express defiant on asylum splash

By Tim Gopsill and Julian Petley

The Parliamentary Committee on Human Rights is just about the most feeble institution in the Palace of Westminster: a cross-party bunch of well-meaning MPs and peers that has no legislative or executive power and can only produce anguished reports that no-one takes any notice of.

Yet when it interviewed Peter Hill, the editor of the *Daily Express*, on the coverage of refugees and asylum seekers in January you might think from his behaviour that it was a police state tribunal set on closing down press freedom as we know it.

The *Express* has the reputation of being, even among UK national papers, the most racist and brutally hostile to refugees. The paper has pursued a classic populist right-wing authoritarian line on the issue – “How the liberal elite is trying to gag us on asylum racket” was the head on an article on Hill’s appearance at the committee. Hill was offensive and patronising – telling one MP: “I can see you will have to come and advise me on my headline writing in future”, and another, “We cannot tailor our headlines to fit news as you would wish it to be”. Several times he told the Parliamentarians they were “stifling debate”. The *Express*’s headlines, it was clear, were not up for discussion, and there was one he was “not prepared to discuss” at all.

This was the front page splash of 27 July 2005 – “Bombers are all spongeing asylum seekers” – referring to four men who had allegedly tried to detonate backpack suicide bombs on public transport in London six days earlier. (Mercifully the bombs did not go off.)

It couldn’t have been more inaccurate. At the time of the story the identity of only two of the suspected bombers was known, and neither was an asylum seeker. Both were the children of



refugees, had grown up in Britain and had indefinite leave to remain. Yet the article began: “The suicide bombers who tried to murder scores of Britons were asylum seekers who raked in more than £40,000 in state handouts, it emerged yesterday”.

The CPBF complained to the Press Complaints Commission (PCC) about this story. The PCC rejected the complaint, giving two reasons: first, that the article’s subjects had not themselves objected to it. (They were, of course, detained at the time.) Second, it said “the terms of the headline were clarified in the body of the article on the front page – that the two men had previously been “given sanctuary” by Britain and had therefore been involved in seeking asylum – and the Commission considered that readers would not have been misled as a result”.

In effect the PCC was saying that inaccurate headlines are fine as long as the inaccuracies are repeated in the text. But when committee chairman Andrew Dinsmore attempted to raise the case Hill immediately interrupted:

“That is a court case that is going on right now and I think it would be very, very wrong of us to comment on that case, because I certainly would not want to be responsible for prejudicing anybody’s trial, and I am not prepared to discuss it.”

Whether a discussion of the nature of the *Express*’s journalism could have been construed as contempt of court is a moot point, but the politicians immediately concurred.

There were other interviewees in the session: senior executives of the *Daily Mail* and *The Guardian* – both of whom conducted themselves with rather more circumspection than Peter Hill – and the director of the PCC itself, Tim Toulmin.

He was there to argue that it would be wrong for the Editor’s Code of Practice, which governs the PCC’s decision-making, to outlaw journalism that discriminates against social groups, rather than against individuals, which is the limit of the code – and a useful loophole for the PCC when confronted with complaints like the CPBF’s.

Toulmin argued that complaints about groups were “generally better dealt with under Clause One, accuracy... People can complain to us if there is a general point of inaccuracy, which we find is an effective way of dealing with the types of complaints that people would initially think may amount to discrimination”.

This, of course, is exactly what the CPBF did in 2005. But once again the Parliamentarians, who seemed to be poorly briefed, failed to press the matter. Both the *Express* and the PCC, when there was evidence to nail them, were let off the hook. Perhaps no-one should expect too much from a man like Peter Hill, but the PCC is supposed to operate a system of regulation. It’s not the first time its failure to deal with the most rotten kind of journalism has been exposed and it won’t be the last.

All the way to Memphis

Granville Williams reports from the US on January's Free Press media reform conference, 'Media Concentration and Net Neutrality: the Big Issues'

I count it a rare privilege to have attended the three national conferences for media reform, organised by Free Press, in the United States. Each conference inevitably focused on different policy priorities and concerns.

The first, in November 2003, took place in the stunning setting of Madison, Wisconsin, and attracted 2,000 people. The organisers originally planned for an event of around 300 people but more people were inspired to get involved in media reform because of one issue: the successful opposition to the proposal by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to tear up rules on media ownership. The massive mobilisation around this issue demonstrated it was possible to take on the FCC, big media and their lobbyists, and win.

A second, and bigger, conference, held in St Louis in May 2005, took place in the aftermath of the Iraq war, and a real sense of anger at the abject failure of the US media to act as watchdogs, or even question the existence of weapons of mass destruction.

There was also the issue of a new assault by the Bush administration on the public broadcaster, PBS, which prompted the veteran journalist, Bill Moyers, to make a powerful speech exposing the behaviour of the Bush nominees to PBS.

And so to Memphis where, between January 12-14, over 3,000 people from across the United States participated in the event with several thousands more accessing the big events online. On my count two participants were from the UK – myself and Andrew Puddephatt from Global Partners, who spoke in a session on Global Information and Communications Policy.

I was involved in a session, Creeping Deeper: Advertising and

Commercialism and covered topics like the "No to Ads" campaign on BBC Online and the proposal to amend the European Union Television Without Frontiers directive to allow product placement on Europe's TV screens. Patric Verrone of the Writers Guild of America, West spoke about the pressures on his members to integrate product placement into story lines, and showed a selection of the more absurd examples from US TV "reality" shows.

In the same session Diane Farsetta, from the Center for Media and Democracy (CMD) highlighted the use of video news releases (VNRs), drawing on an important report, *Fake TV News: Widespread and Undisclosed*.

VNRs are produced by PR firms for clients like General Motors, Intel, Pfizer and Capital One. The report identified a number of disturbing facts: they were widely used by TV stations but viewers would be totally unaware because TV stations did not declare they were VNRs and disguised them as their own reporting. Also TV stations did not balance or supplement the VNRs with other information.

This was one of dozens of high-quality panels and workshop sessions interspersed with plenary sessions with speakers like Senator Bernie Sanders, Hollywood stars Geena Davis and Jane Fonda, FCC Commissioners Bernie Kopps and Jonathan Adelstein, and Reverend Jesse Jackson.

One key campaign issue coming out of Memphis was net neutrality. Companies like AT&T want to introduce "tiered access" to the internet and argue that, because they do the work of providing internet infrastructure, they should be able to charge what they can for it. If people don't pay they will go into the slow lane. Web sites are parasites according to AT&T's chairman, Edward Whitacre, Jr. taking a "free ride" on the pipes the broadband companies own. A campaign to defend net neutrality is battling with the telecommunications companies and their lobbyists.

The other big issue is that the FCC is revisiting rules on media ownership, a requirement placed on it by the 1996 Telecommunications Act. Again the media reform movement is gearing up

Extract from Bill Moyers' speech opening the Free Press conference

"Today, two basic pillars of American society, shared economic prosperity and a public sector capable of serving the common good, are crumbling. The third pillar of American democracy, an independent press, is under sustained attack, and the channels of information are choked. A few huge corporations now dominate the media landscape in America. Almost all the networks carried by most cable systems are owned by one of the major media common conglomerates. Two-thirds of today's newspapers are monopolies.

"As ownership gets more and more concentrated, fewer and fewer independent sources of information have survived in the marketplace; and those few significant alternatives that do survive, such as PBS and NPR, are undergoing financial and political pressure to reduce critical news content and to shift their focus in a mainstream direction, which means being more attentive to establishment views than to the bleak realities of powerlessness that shape the lives of ordinary people.

"What does today's media system mean for the notion of an informed public cherished by democratic theory? Quite literally, it means that virtually everything the average person sees or hears, outside of their own personal communications, is determined by the interests of private, unaccountable executives and investors whose primary goal is increasing profits and raising the share prices. More insidiously, this small group of elites determines what ordinary people do not see or hear. In-depth coverage of anything, let alone the problems real people face day-to-day, is as scarce as sex, violence and voyeurism are pervasive."

to resist any move to further liberalise media ownership rules, and the Memphis conference revealed a confident, vibrant movement gearing up to tackle these issues

Links

www.freepress.net/conference/

www.savetheinternet.com/

Jeff Chester, *Digital Media: New Media and the Future of Democracy* (New Press, 2007)

Eric Klinenberg, *Fighting for Air: The Battle to Control America's Media* (Metropolitan Books, 2007)

A fresh threat to the BBC

By Barry White

As has been widely trailed since before Christmas, Culture Secretary Tessa Jowell announced on 18 January, that the BBC licence fee would be increased by 3 per cent in the next two years, by 2 per cent in the following three years and by up to 2 per cent in the last year (2012-13). It was the last act in a performance that started three years ago with the run up to the renewal of the BBC's Charter, which this settlement is supposed to fund.

Given the additional demands being made on the BBC by Government – meeting the cost of digital switchover and the proposed move to Salford, Greater Manchester – the settlement means less funding for programming which will threaten quality. It will be the front line staffs that suffer. Already thousands of jobs have been cut at the BBC and as funding decreases, the hours employees have to work increases. Staff at the BBC's News Division, BBC People and New Media are currently facing the threat of compulsory redundancies. Strike action is on the cards and it is clear that there will be many battles ahead in the fight to protect and promote public service broadcasting and the BBC's independence.

The deal has Gordon Brown's fingerprints all over it and will leave the BBC with a £2bn hole in its finances. The job losses at the BBC have been appalling. The Guardian reported that, since he became director general, Mark Thompson has removed around 7,000 jobs from the BBC's payroll. A number of its broadcasting operations like BBC

Resources and Worldwide have been privatised and more and more work has gone to independent production companies. Those left behind are left to take the strain, working longer hours with bigger workloads.

Additionally, the BBC is taking on the responsibility for digital switchover (costing some £600m to be funded by the licence fee payer, not the Treasury although it's a Government policy). Although the Government says the BBC will receive an extra £600m over the course of the deal, due to a rise in single-person household buying licences, it has ring-fenced the estimated cost of providing free set-top boxes for those over 75 and other targeted groups making the digital switch. In addition Tessa Jowell has said the BBC may be forced to pay £14m towards the first six years of Channel Four's switchover costs. A final decision on this will be made when Ofcom presents its report on the financial prospects of Channel Four (expected in the summer).

And the costs pile up. The BBC has also to finance the move of some departments to a £190m media centre in Salford and on top of all this; it is expected to make so called future "efficiency savings" of 3 per cent. All this will weaken the BBC (step forward a smiling Rupert Murdoch) and lead to more repeats and further dumbing down – which viewers resent.

In the last few weeks before the settlement was finally announced, it was clear that Jowell and Woodward were in a serious battle with the Treasury. Many speculate that with Brown likely to take over



Tessa Jowell: licence fee announcement

from Blair sometime this summer, Jowell is likely to lose her job in any reshuffle. The future for the BBC and public service broadcasting does not look good. There will be many battles ahead and we need to be able to respond quickly to threatening developments.

● Earlier in January a delegation from the CPBF met Shaun Woodward, minister for creative industries, and impressed on him the need for a licence fee settlement that would not lead to further cuts in programming and staff. In addition they raised criticisms about the role of Ofcom in relaxing public service broadcasting requirements on ITV, the recent purchase of ITV shares by Rupert Murdoch and concerns about product placement in the proposed audiovisual services directive (was Television without Frontiers).

MEDIA WATCHING IN SLOVENIA

By Granville Williams

Slovenia, one of 27 European Union member states, is surrounded by Italy, Austria, Hungary and Croatia, with a tiny stretch of coast on the Adriatic Sea. It is a small country (two million people) with big problems in the media.

One organisation, Mediawatch, associated with the Peace Institute in Ljubljuna, is keeping a watchful eye on media issues and a dedicated team of researchers have produced an excellent series of reports, available in a book *Media for Citizens (Mediji Za Dr avljane)*

and also a handbook for media activists which highlights policy issues.

The book contains three substantial reports. The first, *Media Ownership and Its Influence on Media Independence*, identifies ways in which the independent role of the media is compromised by selective state subsidies and lack of transparency on ownership. It is a very detailed and important account of the pressures faced by the media, and among its recommendations is that the state should withdraw from media companies because "stakes owned by state funds

and state-owned companies are exploited in order to exert political influence on the media, business and editorial decisions and the appointment of executives".

The second report, an analysis of the two prime time news programmes, *24 ur* by POP TV and *Dnevnik* by TV Slovenia, by Marco Prpic, identifies gaps in the coverage of both programmes both in terms of local and regional coverage, and limited representation of minorities and civil society.

The final report, by Roman Kuhar, analysed media representations of minorities

– the Roma, Muslims and gays and lesbians.

Full disclosure. I was pleased represent the CPBF as an advisor on this project. I thought the approach of all the authors to the reports was excellent, and two conferences were held to publicise the findings of the research too. Special mention should be made too of Brankica Petkovic from the Peace Institute who coordinated the Media for Citizens project.

The website mediawatch.mirovni-institut.si/ media4citizens contains the materials in Slovenian and English. Well worth visiting.

Somebody's daughter, somebody's friend

The murders of five young women in Ipswich in 2006 horrified the nation. The media were heavily criticised for their fascination with the personal lives of the victims. **Cari Mitchell** of the English Collective of Prostitutes discusses how violence against sex workers is reported

The slaughter of five young women in Ipswich in December led to an unprecedented outpouring of public concern and showed that the Government, police and media are out of step with public opinion.

The media was caught off guard. A *Guardian* journalist told the English Collective of Prostitutes (ECP) that she and other reporters arrived in Ipswich expecting to find condemnation of how the women, who were sex workers, had lived their lives. Instead they found compassion and the view that everyone in society deserves to be safe from attack, whatever their occupation or lifestyle.

Drowning in a torrent of public criticism for dehumanising the murder victims by calling them "prostitutes", headlines such as Vice Girl Killer (*The Times*) were sometimes later softened to, for example, Women Murdered in Suffolk (*BBC Online*).

This is a far cry from the 1981 trial of the Peter Sutcliffe, the Yorkshire Ripper, when the ECP picketed the High Court to protest at comments (reported uncritically in the press) by the then Attorney General, Sir Michael Havers. When prosecuting Havers said of the victims: "Some were prostitutes, but perhaps the saddest part of this case is that some were not. The last six attacks were on totally respectable women."

Ipswich residents were expected to be voracious in their opposition to street workers. But they have defended sex workers who were being driven out by zero tolerance policies, and are primarily concerned for their neighbours' safety. One letter we received spoke for many:

"The police and local authorities have never taken the welfare of the young women seriously and I'm not convinced that they would be making the efforts they seem to be now if there

were not so much press interest... There have been other disappearances over the years as well as lots of assaults and these have just dropped off their agenda."

The murders have led to demands for a change in the law. As a sex workers' organisation we have personal experience of the impact criminalisation has on safety. Along with many women, including those in Ipswich who organised security measures for themselves and their friends, we know that when prostitute women are not safe, no woman is safe.

Many serial rapists and killers have histories of domestic violence, yet violence against women is rarely a police

The tragic Ipswich murders must not be used for more 'tough on crime' policies which further criminalise people's private lives

priority. The conviction rate for reported rape is a scandalous 1.6 per cent in Suffolk. Over 200 women are murdered each year, half of them by partners or ex-partners. Too many of these murders remain unsolved.

Violent attacks that go unreported or do not result in conviction, allow violent men to attack again and again, and even go on to murder. The Yorkshire Ripper scandal was followed by Fred and Rosemary West, Ian Huntley, Anthony Hardy and others, all of whom had been reported for violence many times before finally being convicted. Many women and girls would still be alive if their attackers had been prosecuted, convicted and appropriately sentenced the first time they struck.

In 1995 we helped two women bring

the first private prosecution for rape in England and Wales when the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) refused to prosecute. The victims, who had been raped at knifepoint by the same man in almost identical circumstances, had been dismissed as "unreliable witnesses" because they were sex workers. Yet Christopher Davies was convicted and sentenced to 11 years on the very evidence the CPS had deemed "insufficient" to prosecute. Davies' previous conviction for attempting to kidnap a young woman into a van fitted with ropes that could tie people down, had resulted in only a six-month prison sentence.

The private prosecution set a precedent. It established that prostitute women are entitled to protection, and that justice can be won, that prejudices can be overcome if the evidence is properly gathered and presented.

Women who have suffered rape, domestic violence or racist attacks generally get a raw deal from the criminal justice system. The conviction rate for domestic violence is under 5 per cent and 7 per cent for racist attacks. Prostitute women are more vulnerable because of criminalisation: treated as criminals, most do not report for fear of being arrested, having their children taken away, being evicted or deported.

The tragic Ipswich murders must not be used for more "tough on crime" policies which further criminalise people's private lives. Whatever any of us thinks about men paying for sex, safety must be the priority.

The proposal to criminalise clients based on legislation introduced in 1999 in Sweden arrogantly assumes that researchers know what's best for those they research. It disregards prostitute women's experience of such criminalisation. Swedish sex workers report that women have been forced underground, the stigma women face has increased, there is less time to check out clients,

regularly clients have been chased away and women displaced across the border into Norway. Even supporters of the Swedish model admit that promised resources for women to leave prostitution have gone mainly to the police and criminal justice system.

While the Swedish law is promoted, New Zealand's experience of decriminalisation is ignored. Yet the New Zealand Prostitutes Collective describes the benefits:

"Some women have come off the street and advertise using their mobile phones. There has been no increase in numbers of women working as prostitutes. Decriminalisation has made a big difference to whether women feel able to report rape and other violence."

Here in the UK, a 2006 review of the prostitution laws reinforced the Government's punitive approach despite evidence that zero tolerance and police crackdowns turn women into "undesirables" and push them into more isolated areas, away from the protection of the community. The resulting fines and Anti-Social Behaviour Orders keep women working or land them in jail, wrecking their lives and separating them from their children.

In Ipswich, these policies were pursued with devastating consequences. One local woman described how "prostitutes used to work yards from each other... but efforts to disperse the women away from the red-light area had driven them apart".

Domestic violence, homelessness, poverty and debt are acknowledged, even by the Government, as major factors driving women into prostitution. We estimate that 70 per cent of prostitute women are mothers, mostly single mothers. Yet a single mother with two children is expected to live on £156 a week and may lose 40 per cent of her benefit if she refuses to name the often violent father of her children.

Women on average receive 52 per cent of men's income (Black women earn even less): 30 per cent of children are living in poverty; housing benefit for young people has been cut; thousands of asylum seekers have been made deliberately destitute; student grants have been abolished; and many industries run into the ground. No wonder many turn to drugs and prostitution to survive.

It is 10 times safer to work off the streets. Yet in 2005 the Government increased the sentence for brothel-keeping (the charge most commonly used against women working together from premises) from six months to seven years.

Anti-trafficking legislation that claims to protect women is targeting immigrant women working from premises for arrest and deportation. It has provided a cover to raid premises where there is no suggestion of trafficked vic-



Sex workers protest: English Collective of Prostitutes church occupation, 1982

tims being held. In the last few months, three women have approached the ECP for help after being accused of trafficking or related offences. In all of these cases the women were either not working as prostitutes or were working collectively with other women with no force or coercion involved. Were it not for the diversion and disinformation so-called trafficking provides, the police could not justify targeting women working independently and more safely in this way.

Urgent change is needed before more women lose their lives. In Ipswich many of the resources made available to help women off the streets while the murderer was at large have already disappeared, and the police have rapidly gone back to arresting street workers, making clear that once again their priority is prosecution not protection. It's

time to look at decriminalisation and how the experience in New Zealand can help us.

It's also time to look seriously at viable economic alternatives to prostitution. Most sex workers are mothers struggling to support families or young people struggling to survive. Many have been in care or have had their children taken from them. Many are in debt. Some choose prostitution as the best of a set of bad choices. Like women everywhere, doing two-thirds of the world's work for 5 per cent of the world's income, we are fighting for more money, less work and an end to criminalisation. If the billions currently being squandered on war and destruction came to women, the primary carers everywhere, and to our communities to fulfill people's needs, no-one would be forced by poverty into sex with anyone.

The English Collective of Prostitutes demands for women's safety include:

- An end to the criminalisation of consenting sex which increases all women's vulnerability to violence. Time and resources now spent arresting and prosecuting sex workers, and non-violent clients, should be redirected towards protecting prostitute women and children from violence. Laws against rape, domestic and other violence should be vigorously enforced, whoever is the victim.
- An end to the government, police and social services treating children like criminals when they survive by begging or prostitution. The reinstatement and increase of benefits and safe housing for under-18s. An increase in the minimum wage.
- Abolition of the term "common prostitute" which labels sex workers as guilty before the case is heard in court.
- Abolition of ASBOs which target,

criminalise and breach the human rights of prostitute women and young people in particular, and have resulted in increasing numbers of vulnerable people being sent to prison.

- Repeal of anti-trafficking legislation which is primarily used to deport women. Human, legal, civil and economic rights, including protection from police and courts, health care, welfare benefits and the right to stay and to seek employment, for immigrant and refugee women facing violence and exploitation.
- An end to kerb-crawling legislation which makes it more dangerous for prostitute women to work, as we have less time to check out clients.
- Services that are independent of the police and criminal justice system and viable economic alternatives so that anyone who wants to leave prostitution has the help and support to do it.

www.allwomenscount.net

The digital dialectic

Opinions on online journalism are sharply divided. Can the web can reinvigorate newspaper journalism and permit a greater diversity of publications? Or will it destroy high-quality journalism? **Julian Petley** and **Gary Herman** kick off the debate

Newspaper journalism in the digital age

By **Julian Petley**

Broadly speaking, there are two basic attitudes to the web: that it will change everything, or that it is simply an incremental development of the already-existing communications system. British newspapers have largely opted for the former view – first in its negative form (the web is a sink of depravity which will indelibly pollute society) and then in its positive one (the web represents the future of the media and must be wholeheartedly embraced).

In the case of *The Guardian*, the engagement has been well-informed and strategic, and the journalism in both the printed and online versions has benefited as a result. Meanwhile, certain other papers' online versions are little more than virtual versions of their printed editions – and that isn't necessarily a criticism. But it is when, as at the *Telegraph*, a cost-driven and seemingly uncritical embrace of the online vision threatens to weaken the whole journalistic enterprise, that warning bells start to sound.

What is needed is a clear idea of what benefits the web can offer journalism. It might be helpful to pose a number of questions. For example, does online journalism possess qualities that print

journalism does not? What is the most productive and mutually beneficial relationship between the online and printed versions of a newspaper? Should newspapers enter the blogosphere at all? Does the latter represent a democratisation of journalism, or does it simply swell the already over-populated ranks of the raucous right-wing commentariat and allow a thousand Melanie Phillips to bloom?

Newspaper readership has been in serious decline in Britain ever since World War II. This has usually been blamed on rivalry from

other media. At first the culprit was television, and now it's the web. The idea that falling readership might be explained by the fact that many erstwhile readers simply couldn't stand the journalism on offer is rarely considered. If online newspapers simply replicate the kind of journalism which has alienated readers of the printed versions, it will hardly be a recipe for success.

Furthermore, if newspaper proprietors fail to invest in good journalism then the future for the whole journalistic enterprise, online as well as print, looks bleak.



The Telegraph: wholeheartedly embracing the web?

The alternative web

By **Gary Herman**

It seems every new generation wants to discuss the media, convergence, whether print can survive, and if digital broadcasting is a kind of anti-Mies van der Rohe – where more is actually less.

Recently, some of Manchester's younger media types – disturbed by developments at the city's news supplier, Guardian and Manchester Evening News (G-MEN) – arranged a meeting to discuss the future of print. There's been a small upswing in print and web titles since G-MEN closed its weekly listings magazine, *City Life*, and directed its energies at the abysmal TV station, Channel M. Young guns have poured into the production of consumerist websites and arch magazines (with websites attached). Like the G-MEN management, these people don't seem to believe in journalism, just the power of the advertiser's buck and warm feeling of life in a niche market.

What people tend to forget is that there has always been an alternative press – small circulation magazines, attempts to fill gaps in

the market, irreverent nose-thumpers. We can recite a litany of successes and failures, from *Private Eye* and *Viz* to *News on Sunday* and the *North West Enquirer*. The only constant is that there's always somebody with a new idea.

It used to be said that the alternative press existed thanks to the invention of the IBM Golfball and cheap offset litho. The web is today's offset litho, with two important differences: it makes for a lower cost of entry and (potentially) global reach.

But even global reach is not that important. There are few examples of global successes on the web. The medium is good for publishing time – or location-based information – you can promote a movie, and allow customers to click through to buy a ticket there and then.

So we're left with low costs. With the spread of home computers, mobile phones and pocket devices, the costs associated with the media move to the consumer. This trend has created "citizen journalism" – an economic extension of the letters page and "Readers' Wives". It means the future of print is in people's homes. But it also means that

web publications often lack the infrastructure necessary to support conventional journalism.

So the web feeds off the senior media, and so-called "pure play" web publications lack authority, brand identity and a genuine sense of community. It's easy to use the medium for deception or fraud, or as a platform for flaky views or vicious demagoguery. It is, in a word, untrustworthy – and professional journalism is built on trust.

But the changes that are happening are real: different media are driven more to do the things they are best at. That means that print journalism becomes more opinionated, more feature driven, more reflective or considered. Online media are more spontaneous, more demotic and more immediate. The web also opens up the processes of journalism (for example, it makes it easy to obtain information straight from the source). This means professional journalism may seem an unnecessary luxury. But it would be short-sighted to predict its demise. The next new idea may well be an old one rediscovered.

Missed opportunity to expose lobbyists

By Nicholas Jones

A brave attempt by the Hansard Society to probe the impact of lobbying on the Parliamentary process failed to address a critical question: How much influence do lobbyists have on civil servants and the outcome Government decisions?

Friend or Foe? Lobbying in British Democracy examines the effectiveness of the burgeoning public affairs industry but the discussion paper by Philip Parvin concentrated on the responses of MPs rather than the real levers of power.

Although, for example, there was no mention of the key role which lobbyists played in influencing the new regulatory regime for broadcasting and the powers of Ofcom, the hidden hand of Rupert Murdoch did get a mention and triggered ripples of laughter when the Hansard Society launched its report.

Pete Digger, deputy managing director of DLA Piper Global Government Relations, identified News International as one company which liked to give the impression it did not employ lobbyists. But another jibe about BSKyB going as far as

supporting its own all-party group of MPs was withdrawn after a denial by Sky's in-house public affairs spokesman.

The jokes at Murdoch's expense only served to underline the limitations of Dr Parvin's study. Nonetheless his discussion paper gave a valuable insight into the rapid expansion of the public affairs industry, currently generating expenditure worth £1.9 bn a year, a tenfold increase in the last 10 years.

According to Ben Atfield, director of Ellwood and Atfield, which specialises in the recruitment of lobbyists, 20,000 people are involved in activities of lobbying, Government relations, brand management, reputation management and stakeholder engagement which fall under the term public affairs.

A survey of 160 MPs revealed that 62 per cent claimed they were more persuaded by arguments put forward by charities and interest groups than businesses. When it came communicating with MPs, 57 per cent believed business was effective, compared with a rating of 91 per cent for charities and 88 per cent for interest groups.

Many of the questions at the launch of

the paper concentrated on the Hansard Society's failure to examine how effective lobbyists were at achieving the ends which their clients expected. Think-tanks, political advisers and commercial pressure groups were considered to have far greater influence on ministers than MPs.

Dr Parvin was challenged by the Conservative MP Andrew Lansley to explain why the survey had not covered the influence lobbyists exerted on the civil service as in his experience 95 per cent of the law was determined by civil servants.

In reply Dr Parvin admitted that the 31 lobbyists surveyed by the Hansard Society had been reluctant to answer questions about their relationship with the Government and civil servants. "We did ask the question... but for some reason the response was much lower."

Clare Ettinghausen, the Society's chief executive, acknowledged the need for further research and said they were carrying out a detailed study into each stage of the approval of four Acts of Parliament and this would examine the pressure which was applied by lobbyists and other pressure groups.

Murdoch under scrutiny

By Barry White

On 12 January the Office of Fair Trading (OFT) ruled BSKyB may have acquired "material interest" over ITV with its recent 17.9 per cent share acquisition.

The OFT reached this "provisional view" following discussions with both parties. "The OFT believes that it may be the case that a relevant merger situation has been created since Sky and ITV may have come under common control for the purposes of the Enterprise Act 2002, as a result of Sky acquiring material influence over ITV, and that the turnover test is satisfied." The statement was welcomed by NTL and Virgin, who saw their attempt to merge with ITV frustrated by Sky's action. NTL was reported as saying that the OFT statement could lead the Department of Trade and Industry to open a full public interest investigation into Sky's shares acquisition.

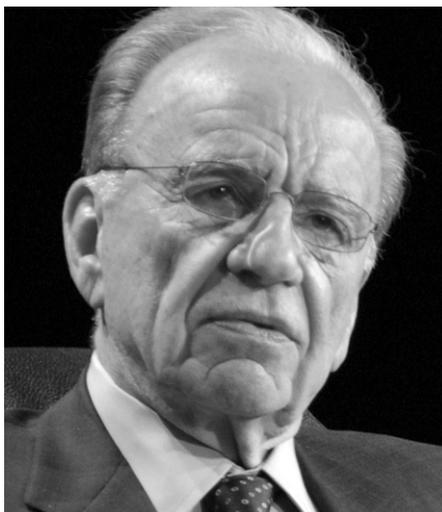
The call for trade and industry secretary Alistair Darling to order a public inquiry was taken up by MPs at the end of January.

In a cross-party motion tabled in Parliament they called on Mr Darling to get Ofcom to advise on "potential public interest considerations" before referring Murdoch's share raid to the competition

commission for further investigation.

Labour MP John Grogan, who initiated the call, believes that as the largest shareholder in ITV, Murdoch would have conflicts of interest concerning sporting rights, the development of Freeview and Freesat and the future of ITV news contracts.

The inquiry by the Office of Fair Trading was still being undertaken when we went to press with no date as yet for a final announcement.



Rupert Murdoch: conflicts of interest

The following Early Day Motion (EDM) was tabled by John Grogan on 30 January. By the half-term recess (12 February) it had attracted 64 signatures. Make sure your MP signs up. Public Interest Test and BSKYB Shares in ITV (EDM 773)

"That this House notes the preliminary findings of the Office of Fair Trading (OFT) of 12th January 2007 that it 'may be the case that a relevant merger situation has been created' following Sky's purchase of 17.9 per cent. of shares in ITV; further notes that the UK's largest commercial broadcaster 'may have come under common control for the purposes of the Enterprise Act 2002 as a result of Sky acquiring material influence over ITV'; believes that the OFT statement recognises the increasing dominance of BSKyB, which accounted for 40 per cent. of total television revenue in 2005, and the potential threat to competition it poses; and calls on the Secretary of State to use his powers under the amended Enterprise Act 2002 to issue a special intervention notice and seek advice from Ofcom on potential public interest considerations before referring the merger to the Competition Commission for further investigation."

News of the World let off the hook by PCC over blagging

By Tim Gossip and Julian Petley

The Press Complaint Commission's inability to tackle corrupt journalism was evident again in January when the *News of the World's* "royal editor" Clive Goodman was jailed for purloining records of mobile phone calls made by members of the Royal Family and other notables.

Goodman was the first journalist to be jailed in England for his work for 44 years.

The scale of the skulduggery involved in the practice known as "blagging" – usually carried out by private detectives – is vast, with hundreds of journalists implicated. It is a national scandal.

The PCC had announced that at the end of Goodman's trial it would investigate the matter and interview *News of the World* editor Andy Coulson.

But when Goodman went down, Coulson resigned – and the PCC said that since he was no longer the editor they couldn't talk to him – nor, apparently, to anyone else from the *NoW* or News International.

Editors have been told to make sure nothing like it ever happens again. Otherwise... well it's not quite clear; nothing from the PCC, but there could well be more legal actions.

Advance Notice

CPBF AGM

10am Saturday 14 July 2007

**National Union of Journalists HQ
308 Gray's Inn Road
London
WC1X 8DP**

Registration from 9.30am

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

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