

FREE Press

No 158 May-June 2007

£1 Journal of the Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom

GAGGED!



By Julie-ann Davies

On May 9 David Keogh (left) and Leo O'Connor (right) were jailed for breaches of the Official Secrets Act. They were accused of leaking a memo containing details of a 2004 meeting

between Tony Blair and George Bush.

After the trial Mr Justice Atkins imposed gagging orders on the media. This means *Free Press* cannot repeat allegations, already in the public domain, about the contents of the memo. Nor can

we repeat comments made in open court by David Keogh.

Several media groups are appealing against the ruling. Meanwhile, as the ruling is not retrospective, stories written prior to the imposition of the order are accessible on the web.

www.guardian.co.uk/crime/article/0,,2076477,00.html

Censorship or freedom?

Venezuela's recent decision to reclaim the airwaves used by Radio Caracas Television raises important issues of freedom of speech and media pluralism, argues **Kathy Lowe**

It is unusual for the non-renewal of a TV company's licence to provoke an international hue and cry. But that's exactly what happened recently in Venezuela. For the first time in 53 years Radio Caracas Television (RCTV), the country's powerful private TV channel, and a virulent critic of the government, found itself off the public airwaves. It now faces the far less profitable alternative of relaying its soaps, game shows, comedies and news to a smaller audience via cable or satellite.

RCTV is owned by the country's wealthy Phelps family who also owns soap, food production and construction firms and has close links with the former ruling party Acción Democrática. When RCTV's licence expired on 27 May its public service frequencies were handed over to TVEs, a newly established state channel.

RCTV, it was argued, must make way for this new public access channel because it had violated the country's broadcasting regulations and failed to fulfil its public service mandate by inciting political violence.

It is certainly undisputed that along with three other private networks RCTV backed an unsuccessful coup attempt to topple president Hugo Chavez in April 2002. It spread lies that Chavez supporters were shooting unarmed civilians, urged people to take to the streets and read out a fake resignation letter from Chavez.

As defenders of the RCTV decision pointed out, if the BBC or Channel 4 had broken the law by inciting the overthrow the UK's elected Government they would not have been allowed to remain on air. Yet opponents of Chavez at home and abroad, citing freedom of speech, seized on Venezuela's action to launch a campaign to try to destabilise his government. Soon the streets of Caracas were echoing to huge protests and counter protests.

Condemnation came in particular



Hugo Chavez: controversial move

from the United States. Chavez's massive victory in the presidential elections last December had a big impact on the US. Washington, hostile to his use of oil revenues to fund a radical programme of nationalisation, land redistribution, education and health reforms, has made no secret of its desire to see the back of him.

Organisations including Human Rights Watch, the Committee to Protect Journalists and Reporters without Borders feared Chavez was stifling free

expression. The International Federation of Journalists too, while rightly concerned about the future of the RCTV workforce and union rights, saw the RCTV case as a "worrying development for media pluralism".

In fact, if there is a problem of media pluralism in Venezuela it is because the media landscape has long been dominated by a bunch of corporate media tycoons. Most notable among these are RCTV's director Marcel Granier and Venevisión's Gustavo Cisneros, who owns some 70 media outlets in 39 countries.

In Venezuela, 95 per cent of all TV, radio and print media are privately owned and a significant majority of these are more sympathetic to the opposition than to the Chavez government.

Judging by audience share, the opposition holds the upper hand in the newspaper sector and in radio. In television Chavez appears to be redressing the balance with the replacement of RCTV by TVEs, the strength of the government station VTV and some 24 community television channels that are mostly sympathetic to the government.

There have been other interesting developments. Until the arrival of Chavez, the poor majority never had access to Venezuela's corporate controlled media outlets.

Now scores of community radio and television stations operate in poor neighbourhoods, limited in outreach but providing access and accountability at local level.

The state has promised that the new TVEs channel will become fully independent and broadcast mainly independent national productions. ANTV allows Venezuelans who can receive cable to observe debates in the national assembly. The cultural television channel Vive TV focuses on communal issues and problems. People are being taught to make their own documentaries in film-making classes around the country.

Venezuela's law on social responsibility in television and radio mandates that five hours of programmes per day be made by independent national producers, with no one producer contributing more than 20 per cent of this transmission. Thousands of independent producers have already signed up with a national registry to take up this opportunity.

All this puts into perspective RCTV's current court challenge about the way the decision not to renew its licence was handled. Whatever the ruling on this aspect, the state's prerogative to determine which broadcasters can use its airwaves is hardly open to question. And all the signs are that the Chavez government has launched a serious attempt to diversify and democratise the country's media.

Held hostage for 100 days

June 20 marked the passing of 100 days since BBC reporter Alan Johnston was kidnapped in Gaza.

Barry White reports

At 2.15pm on 20 June Alan's Johnston's parents released 100 balloons from their home village in Scotland. At the same time, Alan's colleagues across the BBC held vigils to show their support for him, his friends and his family. The vigils also sought to raise awareness about 14 journalists who have been kidnapped in Iraq. Although the western world has focussed on Alan, who was abducted by armed gunmen in Gaza City on 12 March, a number of mostly Iraqi journalists and media assistants have also been kidnapped since September 2005. Their plight has received little publicity.

On the same day the NUJ delivered letters to the new Palestinian prime minister and the British foreign secretary urging them to intensify their efforts to secure Alan's release. The NUJ also thanked the Palestinian Journalists' Syndicate for their support and

help in keeping Alan's case high on the political agenda.

On 31 May confirmation that Alan was still alive came when his captors released a two-minute video of him. The video appeared during the congress of the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) being held in Moscow. A transcript of the video can be found on the BBC web site.

Alan is being held by a little-known group, *Jasih al-Islam* (the Army of Islam) who are now locked in negotiations with Hamas for his return. It has been reported that the group has demanded the release of Muslim prisoners held by the Israelis. Most Palestinian officials believe Alan was seized not because of some radical agenda, but to exert leverage on the then Hamas-led government.

Nevertheless, in an interview with the French newspaper *Le Figaro* published on 16 June, Ismail Haniyeh, a Hamas leader and recently sacked prime minister, tried to sound confident about securing Alan's release. "There will be one sole legitimate force. We will install law and order in Gaza. Thus it will be easier to obtain the release of the British journalist Alan Johnston," he said.

The IFJ's newly elected president Jim Boumelha has called for fresh action by



GUY SMALLMAN: WWW.GUYSMALLMAN.COM

Alan Johnston: kidnapping ordeal

Hamas leaders to free the kidnapped BBC journalist, a fellow member of the National Union of Journalists of Great Britain and Ireland. He said: "It's time for those who have influence in Gaza to make their presence felt and end the three-month ordeal of Alan Johnston."

MEDIA FREEDOM IN PAKISTAN

In the early hours of June 5, Farooq Tariq, general secretary of the Labour Party Pakistan was arrested at his home in Lahore under section 16 of Maintenance of Public Order Act. The day before his arrest he circulated this email about media freedom in Pakistan. This is the second time Tariq had been arrested in less than a month. He is currently in Bahawalpur jail.

There will be a media freedom conference on 6th June at Lahore Press Club auditorium. Prominent politicians and representatives of journalist unions, trade unions, social and political organisation and movements will participate in this conference. The conference is organised by Labour Party Pakistan in cooperation with Action Aid Pakistan.

The conference is organised in the background of open attacks on the freedom of electronic and print media in Pakistan by the Musharaf military regime. Live [coverage]... of the activities of chief justice Iftikhar Choudry is banned, a prominent talk show critical of military regime *Meray Mutabiq* by Dr Shahid Masood of GEO TV has been banned. When GEO still went ahead to air the programme, the cable operators in Pakistan on the instructions of the regime did not show the private TV channel.

Several ...journalists have [recently] got death threats...

The media has become more critical of the military regime in recent times after the unprecedented movement of advocates [lawyers] throughout the country. The media has given reasonable [coverage and] time to the opposition movement. This has annoyed the regime [and prompted them] to carry out the repressive measures.

The Federal Union of Journalist has decided to observe June 7 2007 as a black day throughout the country. They will also put a black ribbon on their heads during all government activities.

Labour Party Pakistan had already organised a demonstration on Friday 1st June [to protest] against these measures. Over 100 activists participated in this demonstration against the restrictions put on the media. Most of the newspaper and private TV channels covered

this event. On 3rd June 2007, Mr Irshad Haqqani, the editor of *Daily Jang*, the largest Urdu paper, mentioned [the demonstration and speeches] in his regular column...

Labour Party Pakistan participation in the present movement of the advocates was recognised recently. On 31st May, LPP was awarded a democratic medal by a group of advocates of Lahore High Court Bar Association at Karachi Hall. The medal was also awarded to some of the advocates who have taken part very actively in the campaign to overthrow the military regime of Pakistan. Some of these advocates' faces were burnt during a demonstration after police attacked them. Some of the advocates were part of the delegation that went by foot in protest from Lahore to Islamabad. *Farooq Tariq* General secretary Labour Party Pakistan www.laborpakistan.org

On the side of the market

Ofcom, the body responsible for regulating TV and telecoms, takes an unnecessarily pessimistic view of its role, writes **Tom O'Malley**

Convergence refers to the undeniable fact that our media are changing. Technical, economic and regulatory change has transformed the media landscape during the last decade. Television, radio and newspapers can now be accessed online or on mobile phones. The technology, which services the 70 per cent plus of the UK population that has digital TV is, at root, the same technology which allows videos to be uploaded and viewed on the web.

But today convergence carries another, less explicit implication. It is the idea that the future will be dominated by the market, because changes in technology and economics make positive, public service orientated regulation, economically unrealistic.

Ofcom, the body responsible for regulating commercial satellite, cable and terrestrial TV and telecoms is firmly on the side of the pessimists. Since its inception in 2003 Ofcom has drawn on the 2003 Communications Act and taken the view that the way forward must be less regulation. Speaking to MPs in April, Ofcom chair David Currie said: "We have a duty to look wherever possible, wherever appropriate, to reduce regulatory burden, to withdraw regulation that is out of date and in general, to modernise whatever regulation is needed."

Two days later, Ed Richards, Ofcom's chief executive, addressed a conference of the Voice of the Listener and Viewer (VLV). He gave an example of Ofcom's reluctance to act pro-actively on questions of content regulation where profits were concerned. The case of

ITV companies who had charged viewers premium phone rates to

enter competitions which had already closed was seen by Richards as "not a failure of regulation, but a failure of compliance". Yet Ofcom had "regulated" these services into existence. It had overseen the meteoric rise of these cynical devices to squeeze money out of viewers, and apparently saw nothing wrong in them until a major scandal erupted.

Richard's discussion of public service broadcasting (PSB) was cast in Ofcomspeak – fragmenting the idea so that it can be measured and market assessed. Instead of a wide range of evolving content across all forms of output, it becomes the BBC's output, plus bits of ITV, C4 and C5's output – with no mention of S4C or Gaelic broadcasting. PSB in commercial TV is not the whole output, but is made up of "key genres...traditionally provided alongside the BBC, but which, although socially desirable, are commercially unattractive". That is, news, regional news and non-news programming and children's TV.

The logic is relentless: accept that there isn't much to be done about convergence, accept the need for minimum regulation, accept the commercial priorities of the industry and the conclusion is obvious, "commercial PSBs will find it more difficult to sustain their former obligations in the digital age".

"I fully expect to hear calls for Ofcom to intervene in various areas" Richards, told the VLV. He meets this local difficulty by warning that in this area Ofcom's powers "are often misunderstood or exaggerated". Could this be true? Or is it Ofcom that is mired in misunderstanding and exaggeration?

The powers he lists, and which Ofcom arguably under uses, concern production quotas in original, regional, peak and network programmes, plus its power to assess proposed changes in TV schedules. These are obviously not much good because – and we can almost hear the sigh of resignation, "where commercial incentives and regulatory ambition are not reasonably well aligned, effective regulation is less likely to follow".

It is the negative tone of this argument that stands out. Convergence is simply assumed to mean less regulation. Like some unbending law of nature, "commercial incentives" dictate the terms of the debate. All calls for positive intervention must therefore come from people who stupidly misunderstand and exaggerate Ofcom's powers.

But Ofcom is not a neutral player overseeing the unbending laws of media economics. It is organisationally committed to stripping away regulation. It is staffed by people like Currie and Richards who are fully paid up members of the dominant neoliberal



Ofcom chief Ed Richards: gloomy

elite in UK politics – Richards was the key advisor to Blair on the 2003 Communications Act.

There is much that Ofcom could do. If it does not have the muscle needed to build and sustain a strong PSB sector across all platforms, it could lobby the Government for stronger powers. Instead of insisting on using its powers to scrutinise every new initiative of the BBC it could allow Corporation-led public service expansion in the digital arena. It could stamp on talk about top-slicing the licence fee.

Using its existing powers over

licences, spectrum access and the electronic programme guides it could cajole commercial operators into producing more PSB material.

Or, it could lobby for new powers to control the back catalogues (with suitable protections for those producers who gain income from repeats etc.), of those commercial companies that benefited for years from being protected recipients of TV advertising revenue. The BBC's back catalogue is a public asset, why not ITV's? Ofcom could call for general taxation or an industry levy to fund more public service output.

Convergence is bound up with technology and economics, but how it is handled is essentially political. Ofcom's approach is political. It has a partisan position on the role of markets and their impact on communications. We need to keep this fact to the fore in our arguments. We should work for a converged media with a major public presence and in so doing sustain a high profile criticism of Ofcom and its misleading regulatory pessimism. Ofcom exaggerates its own powerlessness in the face of convergence and we misunderstand or forget this at our peril.

Fewer complaints, more complacency

Chris Frost analyses the performance of the Press Complaints Commission

Last year was a busy year for media regulators and the Press Complaints Commission (PCC) was no exception. Law change proposals, phone-tapping scandals, rows over data protection and freedom of information have kept PCC chairman Sir Christopher Meyer, the commissioners and his staff at their desks diligently earning their £927,208 in salaries and related costs.

Despite this, according to the PCC *Annual Review 2006* the number of complaints made to the PCC fell in 2006. The number of complaints adjudicated also fell from 30 to 22 with only five of these being upheld. With figures like these, it is hardly surprising that the PCC report makes great play of the rise in the number of resolved complaints – up by 20 per cent to 418.

The PCC claims this is an illustration of a major culture change: "Editors now routinely offer meaningful resolutions to breaches of the code – and on occasion offer to resolve matters that may not in fact breach the Code." The PCC identifies this as an advantage of resolution rather than adjudication: "This is one of the advantages of a system of conciliation which brings parties together rather than having to make a judgement on who was right in each case."

The PCC now publishes resolutions on its website and picks key cases to run in the annual report having finally accepted the argument long made by critics, including the CPBF, that journalists and editors need to know the thinking of the PCC in operation of its code. "The Commission has an important function issuing formal public rulings through its adjudicated complaints. These have a number of uses: educating editors about the Commission's interpretation of the Code..." The PCC also "publishes details of each resolved complaint on its website homepage in order to give further visibility to the resolution..."

The Commission is at pains to point out it has dealt with a number of privacy cases – more than the courts – and claims this shows the significance of its rulings in this area. However, it is doubtful many editors would be able to quote the PCC's handful of significant rulings whilst the key court cases will be etched onto their proprietors' wallets.

There was a substantial reduction in the number of discrimination complaints made to the PCC during the past year. The number of complaints about discrimination has now

fallen with only 2.6 per cent appearing as a potential breach of the code. This may be due to the PCC advising groups likely to complain under the discrimination clause that it might be better for them to complain under clause one – accuracy.

The report makes much of their evidence that corrections and apologies made tend to appear on the same page or earlier in the paper than the original mistake. However, the same argument can be made in reverse. 74 per cent of apologies and corrections appeared on the same page or further forward but about 70 per cent appeared on the same page or further back – 17 per cent of them more than five pages further back.

The Compliance Commission made several recommendations that were picked up by the PCC. It asked the PCC to write to editors about their behaviour, even when the problem was overtaken by events. It asked for the flowchart of how complaints were dealt with to be reinstated in the PCC's

guidance leaflet to complainants, and asked for the time limit on complaints to be doubled from one to two months, something that substantially reduced the number of complaints dropping out of time.

It also pre-empted the DCMS select committee by agreeing to regulate audio and visual content on newspaper websites. They trumpeted the not surprising support for this move from proprietors as a major success, rather than the obvious attempt by cross media owners to get around much

tougher regulation from Ofcom.

Sir Christopher Meyer said: "What the industry has done in announcing this extension of the PCC's remit is to underline its confidence in the system of common-sense regulation that we operate, and to demonstrate to the public that editorial information in the digital age – regardless of the format in which it is delivered – will be subject to high professional standards overseen by the Commission."

The PCC cryptically claims "It also means that newspaper and magazine websites are subject to a greater degree of regulation than those of broadcasters, which must wait for legislators to update existing rules." If by this it means Ofcom's reluctance to regulate broadcast websites in the way that parliament clearly expected, then it's a strange way of saying so. Ofcom's regulatory framework is tougher than the PCC's and likely to remain so. Its reluctance to regulate websites not identified with broadcasters mirrors that of the PCC.

The PCC claims to be fast, free and fair. Read that as slick, free and plausible and it may be that a Britain that seems to care little for a traditional watchdog free press has got the regulator it deserves.

It is doubtful many editors would be able to quote the PCC's handful of significant rulings whilst the key court cases will be etched onto their proprietors' wallets

Murdoch faces probe

By Barry White

Rupert Murdoch's dominance of the UK media scene is under serious scrutiny by the Competition Commission, following Alistair Darling's reference to the Commission of News Corporation's influence over ITV.

The announcement came on 24 May, when the secretary of state for trade and industry referred last November's British Sky Broadcasting Group's purchase of a 17.9 per cent stake in ITV plc to the Competition Commission under Section 45(2) of the Enterprise Act. Under the Act, the Competition Commission must now conduct a detailed investigation into the effects of the transaction "both on competition and on the specified public interest consideration relating to the plurality of persons with control of media enterprises".

Announcing the reference, Darling said: "My decision reflects consideration of the reports I have received from both the Office of Fair Trading and Ofcom and of other representations I

have received about this matter. On the basis of the evidence before me, a fuller investigation by the Competition Commission is justified."

The Commission will report its findings in early November and could force Murdoch to sell his stake in the terrestrial broadcaster if it finds his shareholding in ITV lessens competition in the media sector and works against the public interest. A provisional report is expected in mid-September.

Ofcom has already said that Sky's stake in ITV was anti-competitive and the Office of Fair Trading reported the holding was large enough to qualify for a merger and threatened the independence of the terrestrial broadcaster. On 25 May *The Independent* reported the Department of Trade and Industry had estimated a combined Sky and ITV would give Murdoch 30 per cent of the TV news market. That's in addition to the 39 per cent News International stake in Sky and a 36 per cent control of the UK newspaper market!

At the end of May, the Competition Commission published a provisional timetable for its inquiry and asked for

responses from interested parties. The Campaign and the NUJ have submitted representations to the Commission, the deadline for which was 20 June (a copy of the CPBF submission may be seen on the CPBF web site at www.cpbf.org.uk).

Much of the work of the Competition Commission may seem technical and remote, but the outcome of the review is important to all who care about the position and influence Murdoch has in UK media. CPBF supporters are urged to contact their MPs and press them to ensure the Commission examines the wider question of Rupert Murdoch's British media holdings, the danger of his dominance to media plurality and the power this gives him to direct Government policy on a wide range of issues.

In the next few months the CPBF will be developing its campaigning work on media ownership with a view to making it an important issue at the next general election. The reference to the Competition Commission opens up real opportunities to media campaigners, so watch the CPBF web site for further information.

Consistently biased



ISRAEL-PALESTINE ON RECORD: HOW THE NEW YORK TIMES MISREPORTS CONFLICT IN THE MIDDLE EAST
Howard Friel and Richard Falk
Verso, £12.99

accounts, Falk and Friel reveal a consistent pattern in the *NYT's* reporting which privileges Israeli concerns over Palestinian rights.

While international law is routinely invoked to judge the actions of countries deemed hostile, it never figures in *NYT* reports and editorials on US foreign policy. That the paper chooses to ignore international law arguments shows it has little interest in presenting an holistic portrayal of the conflict's realities.

Moreover, as the authors argue, "the liberal image of the *Times* gives the American government added room for manoeuvre when it takes such one-sided positions that correspond with the imbalances of American foreign policy."

International Law is clear on the illegality of Israeli occupation, the application of the Fourth Geneva Convention, the rights of the refugees to return to their homes, the illegality of the settlements, the illegality of torture.

However, acknowledging this would reveal a dimension which, while obvious to the rest of the world, has been long obscured in the US by skewed coverage: that Israel is an illegal occupying power

engaged in grave and sustained breaches of international law.

The *NYT* devoted 50 front page stories and 25 front section stories to Palestinian violence between 2000 and 2006. The more numerous Israeli acts of violence never made it to the front page. On many occasions, Israeli violence goes unreported altogether, until the silence is broken by the inevitable Palestinian response.

There is a similar qualitative difference, which the authors highlight by contrasting *NYT* reports with respected Human Rights organisations — Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, ICRC and B'Tselem — as well as the British and Israeli press.

The book contains two extended case studies dealing with *NYT* coverage of the Israeli assaults on Gaza and Lebanon and comparing two prominent figures, Noam Chomsky and Alan Dershowitz. The *NYT* casts Chomsky and Dershowitz, respectively, in roles of extremist and expert. These studies condemn the *NYT* as a deeply ideological paper which resorts to an inversion of morality — and reality — to sustain its self: image as an impartial observer of the conflict.

By Muhammad Idrees Ahmad

Following their devastating study, *The Record of the Paper: How the New York Times Misreports US Foreign Policy*, Howard Friel and Richard Falk return with *Israel-Palestine on Record: How the New York Times Misreports Conflict in the Middle East*. This book examines the newspaper's coverage of the Middle East's most intractable conflict.

The *NYT's* stance on Iraq has fluctuated between caution and overt support for the war. But, any concern for objectivity is forgotten in their coverage of Israel and Palestine. Using international law as a benchmark by which to judge the merit of competing

A history of spin

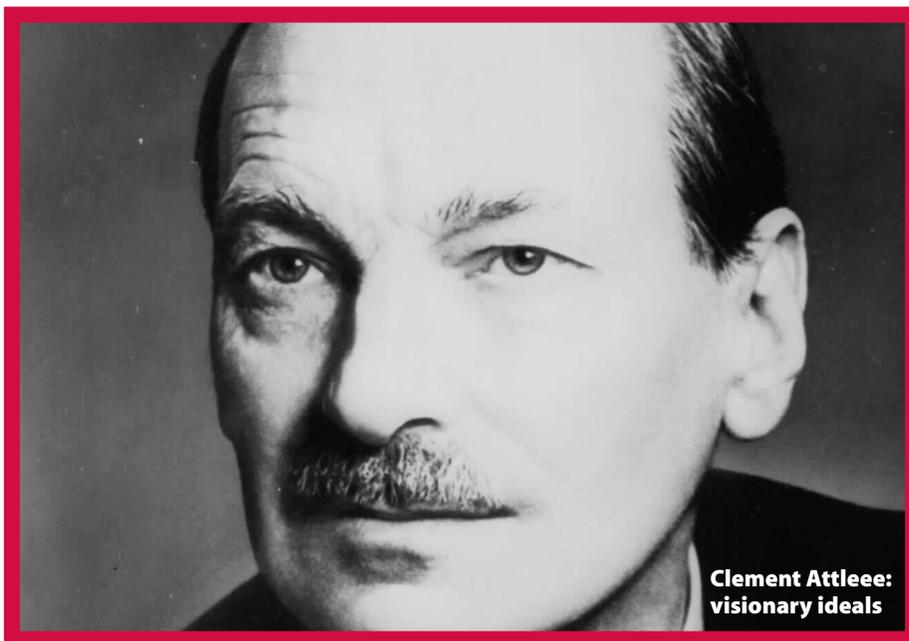
By Nicholas Jones

Shining through *The Origins of Modern Spin*, Martin Moore's history of the early relationship between British Governments and the news media, is the idealism of the post-war Labour administration and its pioneering work in promoting what Clement Attlee always hoped would be the people's "conscious and active participation in public affairs." In their drive to ensure the creation of the welfare state and the nationalised industries became a partnership between people, Parliament and Government, Attlee and his cabinet colleagues laid the foundations for the communication strategies which are now regarded as an everyday tool of any self-respecting democracy.

Moore traces the state's attempts to manage the media during 1945-51. Although the zeal of the early years did turn towards what he concludes was a more "pragmatic relationship" the contrast between the high principles of the Attlee era and the squalid and politically corrupt spin of the Blair years is starkly fascinating. Instead of disbanding the war-time information and propaganda services, the newly-elected Government used the existing staff and their expertise to develop new institutions and procedures which it was hoped could inform, explain and promote what was being done in the electorate's name. 1945 was pivotal because it was the year that Central Office of Information was conceived in order to conduct publicity campaigns on behalf of Government departments and when Downing Street started to hold regular daily lobby briefings for political journalists.

Herbert Morrison, the Lord President (and Peter Mandelson's grandfather), championed the creation of Britain's first peacetime communications machinery because the people "have a right to know" facts that would give them a full understanding of Government decisions. Francis Williams, former editor of the *Daily Herald*, became Attlee's public relations adviser after heading the Ministry of Information's news and censorship division during the war. Moore writes vividly about the peacetime transformation which Williams initiated on becoming the Number 10 press secretary.

Williams introduced lobby briefings; sought to professionalise the information officers in each Government department; and encouraged steps such as the co-ordination by Central Office of Information of the distribution of press releases about Government announcements through what became known as the "COI run" to the offices of newspapers, broadcasters and news agencies.



Clement Attlee:
visionary ideals

After reading Moore's clear and engaging exposition of these pioneering moves to increase the amount of information flowing from state to press and public, I tried to come up with a checklist for the Blair years. Unease within the current administration about the scope and operation of the Freedom of Information Act of 2000, is a testament to its success in allowing greater scrutiny of the machinery of national and local government.

However, within Downing Street there has been none of the commitment to open government shown by Francis Williams. Admittedly Blair's director of communications, Alastair Campbell, took some tentative steps to open up the lobby briefing. From 1997 the briefings were placed on the record and could be attributed to the Prime Minister's official spokesman; in February 2000, Number 10 started publishing extracts on the Downing Street website and in 2002 Campbell broke the closed shop of political correspondents allowing specialist and foreign correspondents to attend the briefings.

But the value of the briefings withered under the malign influence of Campbell and his burgeoning band of politically-appointed special advisers who preferred to distribute leaks and tip-offs to favoured journalists on a selective and exclusive basis. Rarely now are the twice-daily briefings ever used as a platform to explain and inform journalists about the background to Government decisions. Instead they are little more than a Downing Street notice board and whenever probed too closely the official spokesmen slip into a defensive, "no comment" mode.

By instituting his own monthly televised news conferences, Tony Blair bypassed the lobby and provided the media at large with an unparalleled opportunity to challenge the Prime Minister but occasional high-profile outings are no substitute for what should be daily televised briefings, along the lines of those held at the White House, which would force the Government to respond to the issues of the day.

Thanks to the increasing dominance of the internet and the enthusiasm with which the traditional news media have embraced interaction with readers, viewers and listeners. There is now an ideal opportunity for the Government to match the pioneering work of the Attlee administration.

Whitehall departments and public authorities can now communicate instantly not just with the media but also with pressure groups and individual citizens. Ensuring equal access via websites and email would bring immediate gains: all sections of the news media would be on an equal footing and so would campaigners and the like.

Clear guidelines would be needed for civil servants and other officials who would be told that when releasing information to the public they should do their utmost to ensure a level playing field. Technological developments have paved the way to what potentially is another pivotal moment in updating the machinery of communications between state and public. But where oh where is the vision of the Attlee Government?

Martin Moore's book, The Origins of Modern Spin is published by Palgrave Macmillan

MediaChannel faces closure for lack of funds

After seven and a half years, MediaChannel.Org, the United States-based media monitoring network, is threatening to close its doors because of lack of funds.

The website is asking for 1500 readers to each give \$25 by 30 June. This will be enough to keep the site going for another three months.

The independent site, mainly funded by reader and member donations, does not have sufficient resources to support its small staff and pay its rent, server fees and utilities.

"The ultimate irony is that MediaChannel has never been better," says co-founder Danny Schechter. "Is traffic is up and its impact strong."

The website has featured coverage on how the US mainstream media led the country into the Iraq war, and hosts news by bloggers from around the world — including Riverbend, a young Iraqi woman who writes about conditions in the country after the war.

To donate visit www.mediachannel.org or send a cheque to MediaChannel's fiscal sponsor: The Global Center, 575 Eighth Avenue, Suite 2200, New York, New York, US 10018

If you have ideas or suggestions, email: dissector@mediachannel.org

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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