

# FREE Press

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## MP slams coverage of Bridgend suicides

By Mike Jempson

**B**ridgend MP Madeleine Moon has submitted a dossier to the Press Complaints Commission (PCC) about recent newspaper coverage of a cluster of youthful suicides in her constituency.

One of the worst examples was the *Daily Express's* front-page story on 7 February, the day she initiated a House of Commons debate about the issue. "Another Girl Hangs Herself in Death Town" ran the headline over a story calling Bridgend "the suicide capital of Britain". It claimed "renewed fears... of an internet death cult in the town" and predicted more such deaths.

A *Daily Telegraph* feature on the suicides has also drawn criticism from Moon's constituents. Published on 24 January it represented the town as a place of utter hopelessness. A quote from an unnamed young girl said: "Suicide is just what people do here because there is nothing else to do." On the same day the *Daily Express* ran with "Suicide is Cool" says Friend of Death Gang".

Interviewed on BBC R4's *Today* programme Moon called much of the coverage of the suicides "absolutely disgraceful". She claimed that all of the Samaritan's reporting guidelines had been breached during the previous two weeks by stories which had put other vulnerable young people at risk. Moon rebuked Society of Editors' director Bob Satchwell for defending the complacency of editors unwilling to acknowledge that insensitive coverage might result in "copycat" behaviour.

Many newspapers were swift to blame the Internet for the suicides and attempted suicides and claimed that – despite their denials – the local police and Coroner Philip Walter took this view. Given the popularity of social networking sites it was unsurprising

many of the young people involved had communicated via the Internet, nor that their friends had posted tributes to the deceased, sparking off newspaper claims of "death cults".

Moon was equally irate about the lack of rigour in the media's approach to the story. She pointed out that most coverage focused on the town of Bridgend whereas the suicides took place in the county borough of Bridgend which includes two constituencies. In the year to January 2008 there were at least 13 suicides among young people, with a cluster of seven young men and women in the final month. It was this apparently sudden increase that caught the headlines. Moon reminded the Commons there were 21 suicides among local young men in 2006, at a time when Wales was witnessing 21 suicides a month.

Replying to her in the debate Huw Irranca-Davies, under-secretary of state for Wales, said: "Research shows that media reporting can have a significant impact and influence on young people's response to suicides. Therefore, I strongly urge measured and considered reporting of all such events and of the debate today, with consideration for the impact that that may have on the bereaved families and the wider community."

His plea is echoed in all the guidelines produced by journalists organisations and suicide prevention agencies in the UK, Ireland and internationally. Meanwhile MediaWise, which has played a leading role in developing awareness about suicide reporting, has been approached about two versions of the same story that appeared on Northcliffe Media's *thisisgloucestershire* website on 1 February.

"Hairdresser Set Timer for Suicide ," read one; "Dad Wired Fingers to the Mains," said the other. The stories, from the *Gloucester Echo* and sister

paper *The Citizen*, go into precisely the forensic detail warned against when the Editors' Code of Practice was tightened up 18 months ago after the controversial publication of photographs showing an American lawyer jumping to her death.

In October 2007 the Samaritans congratulated the PCC for upholding a complaint against *The Wigan Evening Post*, *The Wigan Observer* and their shared website for publishing details of how a local teacher had electrocuted himself. The Commission said it had used the opportunity to underline to editors the importance of taking care when reporting suicides to avoid the risk of imitative behaviour – a requirement under the new Code clause (5ii).

All these incidents serve to confirm the findings of research conducted among journalists by MediaWise in 2005-06. The study demonstrated that the existence of guidelines has little effect unless the topic is drawn to journalists' attention during vocational training, or they have had personal experience of suicidal behaviour – when they are more likely to seek advice about how to report sudden deaths.

The message also comes across in a new handbook that has emerged from lengthy consultations between the media industry and mental health groups. *What's the Story?* offers information and insights to journalists working on stories about people experiencing mental illness.

- *Sensitive Coverage Saves Lives: Improving media portrayal of suicidal behaviour* Download from [www.mediawise.org.uk](http://www.mediawise.org.uk) or order copies from 0117 93 99 333
- *What's the Story? Reporting Mental Health and Suicide* Download from [www.shift.org.uk/mediahandbook](http://www.shift.org.uk/mediahandbook) or order from 0845 223 5447

# Licence fee shenanigans

There is a real danger that the government will divert funds from the BBC to other public service broadcaster – yet no one at the BBC is kicking up a fuss. **Nicholas Jones** reports

One of the final acts of outgoing culture secretary, James Purnell, was to put the possibility of top-slicing the BBC's licence fee back on the political agenda. In response to Purnell's speech at January's Oxford Media Convention the CPBF wrote to the *Guardian* condemning the idea and suggesting alternative ways to fund public service broadcasting (PSB) on commercial channels.

Within a week, after a cabinet reshuffle, Purnell was replaced by Andy Burnham, who as chief secretary to the treasury, shared responsibility for the last BBC licence fee settlement which, forecasters say, will lead to a £2bn shortfall and has already necessitated hundreds of redundancies.

At the end of January, it was reported that the Government has rejected a Commons media select committee recommendation to tighten Channel 4's public service remit in exchange for allowing it a share of the licence fee.

In a written response, the committee was told that the "Government does not believe that, at present, there is a clear case for the amendment of C4's public service remit." Channel 4's report on its post-digital switchover PSB remit is expected in March 2008 but I believe there are real dangers to the future of the licence fee.

Whenever I write about the plight of former colleagues facing ever-increasing uncertainty in the BBC, I feel somewhat guilty. I was one of the lucky ones, a beneficiary of three decades of almost continuous expansion in radio and television. What is missing in the BBC of today is the passionate defence of public service broadcasting which I used to hear 30 years ago.

Why is the Corporation's management so reluctant to speak with real conviction about the incalculable value of the licence fee? If you ask me to pinpoint the one change which I find so



**Nicholas Jones: "one of the lucky ones"**

depressing it is this sense that the top management doesn't perhaps even understand what is worth preserving, let alone know how to achieve it.

I believe this is a legacy of John Birt's eight years as director general. In getting so close to Tony Blair and the rest of the New Labour elite, he seemed to neuter the BBC as a free spirit, he somehow demolished that great tradition of independence and great sense of pride in what the BBC did. Instead Birt cultivated a managerial culture within the BBC, stuffed with advisers on corporate and strategic relations, which lives on in the Ofcom of today.

Rather than proclaim publicly what the BBC stood for, Birt and his cohorts preferred to deal directly but privately with the Blair government, adviser to adviser, strategist to strategist.

Later, Birt reinvented himself as Blair's blue skies thinker. But look what happened to some of his clones: Ed Richards, Birt's controller of corporate strategy, is now chief executive officer of Ofcom and James Purnell, Birt's head of corporate planning, was the culture secretary whose final task was to give another push to top-slicing. Richards and Purnell were originally two of Birt's brightest stars but once Labour were elected in 1997 they were signed up by Blair as special advisers in the Downing Street policy unit.

There hardly seems to be anyone in the top echelons of management punching for the BBC's independence, singing the praises of the licence fee. I think having the guts to defend the licence fee has to be the foundation of any future campaigning we do on behalf of the BBC.

To his credit, Sir Michael Lyons, chairman of the BBC Trust, did meet this threat head on in his speech to the Oxford Media Convention. Although I thought he could have been far more explicit about the dangers of what Ofcom is considering, he did raise questions about the possible risks of top-slicing. But can we rely on Sir Michael to fight his corner? No, he said: "I do not see myself as a gladiator for the licence fee."

Purnell's determination to force a debate on top-slicing was endorsed almost immediately by Andy Burnham, who said: "I am a very strong believer in the BBC, but in a changing landscape you should have an open mind about the way to fund public service broadcasting in future".

Let us hope we can generate a debate about the future of the licence fee but what seems most likely is that key decisions will be taken adviser to adviser, strategist to strategist. Ed Richards and Andy Burnham have a strong ally in Downing Street, none other than Stephen Carter, the former Ofcom chief executive, who originally put up the idea of top-slicing the BBC's licence income and who is now Gordon Brown's chief strategist and key fixer.

Given the fact that this cosy threesome holds such sway, what really concerns me is that the BBC's current director general Mark Thompson is very muted on the vital question of funding. Under the last charter renewal, which expires in 2016, the licence fee has only been guaranteed until 2013 and I sense the latest generation of the BBC's corporate planners and strategists have already thrown in the towel and conceded that the licence fee of the future will be divvied up among other public service broadcasters. I would go further: the licence fee has already been excluded from much of the BBC's public discourse, as though it is the founding principle that dare not speak its name.

# BBC strike action put off

By Barry White

**T**he threat of BBC strike action has receded after talks with the broadcasting unions. An agreement has been reached in principle that could prevent industrial action over 1,800 redundancies planned as part of the latest cost cutting drive by the BBC director general, Mark Thompson.

BBC staff union members will vote in March on the provisional agreement that has been thrashed out over compulsory redundancies, allowances and pensions.

A joint statement on 23 January from the BBC and broadcasting unions BECTU, the NUJ and Unite said: "After extensive overnight talks, the BBC and the joint unions (BECTU, the NUJ and Unite) have reached agreement in principle in the current dispute.

"The agreement is subject to acceptance by a consultative ballot of the joint unions' membership. All the parties welcome the progress made so far on jobs, allowances and pensions and will continue to work together to achieve an acceptable final settlement."

However, the threat of compulsory

redundancies still remains in BBC current affairs and talks between the union and management are continuing.

Meanwhile the privatisation juggernaut trundles on at the Corporation as BBC Resources looks set to be split up and sold to a number of bidders. The deal to sell Resources, the Corporation's studios, post production and outside broadcast operation, is entering the final negotiation stage, but according to reports has been hampered by concerns over pensions.

Pinewood Shepperton, the studio business chaired by Michael Grade, ITV's executive chair, is understood to be one of the companies in final talks with the BBC.

The BBC is hoping to push through the sale by 31 March, but staff say their pensions could be penalised as a result, concerns shared with staff in other sections that have been outsourced. These include former human resources staff sold off to Capita, staff transferred to building services company Land Securities Trillium and Johnson Controls and BBC technology staff, who transferred to Siemens in 2004.



All quiet: BBC strikes have been averted

## US writers' strike is over

By Barry White

**Members of the Writers Guild of America (WGA) have voted to call off their strike action following negotiations on a settlement by their union leaders. Members voted for the deal in meetings held in Los Angeles and New York on 12 February.**

"The strike is over. Our membership has voted, and writers can go back to work," said Patric M. Verrone, president of the Writers Guild of America, West. "This was not a strike we wanted, but one we had to conduct in order to win jurisdiction and establish appropriate residuals for writing in new media and on the Internet. Those advances now give us a foothold in the digital age. Rather than being shut out of the future of content creation and delivery, writers will lead the way as TV migrates to the Internet and platforms for new media are developed."

**Michael Winship, president of the Writers Guild of America, East said: "The success of this strike is a significant achievement not only for ourselves but the entire creative community, now and in the future. The commitment and solidarity of our members made it happen and have been an inspiration not only to us but the entire organised labour movement. We will build on that energy and unity to**



Not a comma: the WGA stayed out for three months

**make our two unions stronger than ever."**

**Strike action, the first in 20 years, started on 5 November 2007. It was sparked over a dispute for higher royalties on DVD sales, and the introduction of payments for Internet downloads, currently a "royalty-free zone". The action hit TV and film production and led to the cancellation of the Golden Globe awards ceremony. Once the deal has**

**been agreed by members, the Academy Awards ceremony went ahead as planned on 24 February.**

**The following message from the Writers Guild of Great Britain was sent to the WGA by Bernie Corbett the Guild's general secretary:**

**"We salute the WGA, East and West, on the unity and discipline shown throughout a long and tough strike, resulting in a settlement which makes historic progress in the most important areas. You can be proud of your members and negotiators and of the deal you have reached.**

**"The action by the WGA has inspired screenwriters and other trade unionists all around the world, and has had the excellent spin-off of increasing the profile and status of screenwriters everywhere.**

**"We congratulate you and send you our warmest regards, Bernie Corbett, General Secretary, Writers' Guild of Great Britain."**

## Report



**Alan Johnston: "People who threaten, or abduct, or kill journalists aren't easily persuaded by reason."**

NUJ general secretary Jeremy Dear gave the grim statistics for attacks on journalists last year, when 172 journalists were killed around the world. "A media worker is killed every 48 hours," he said, "and less than 2 per cent of those who attack them are brought to justice. There is a culture of impunity that has to be fought."

Media commentator and former national editor Peter Wilby spoke of the social changes in journalism. "It used to be a very egalitarian profession. Everyone did their three years on a local paper. Now you have to do work experience, hanging around newsrooms before you get your chance.

"It helps if your family lives in London and you can stay with them. Journalism has become more elitist." Wilby added that commercial imperatives were more important to publishers than editorial. "The head of marketing at a newspaper has far more influence than the editor."

Legal threats to journalists were discussed by leading media lawyer Mark Stephens. "We live in a town named Sue", he said. Litigants were rushing to the London courts backed by "no-win-no-fee" lawyers, charging £700 an hour for their services, who couldn't lose. "Papers are settling actions because of how much they are likely to have to pay out," he added.

David Crouch of Media Workers Against The War warned of increased censorship through the Ministry of Defence controlling embedding reporters presenting a "Boy's Own" view of the war in Afghanistan.

Paul Mason of the BBC *Newsnight* programme talked of the future of the BBC. "In the debate about public service broadcasting there is a fatalism that the only outcome is that YouTube replaces the BBC," he said, "but the BBC can survive the transition to the multi-channel and fragmented world.

"The bosses and the policy-makers are missing how much has changed already. The BBC is starting to become a responsive platform, there is more transparency. It can become a far more democratic and transparent platform than anything else in society. "There are very popular channels and programmes. Why would you want to destroy it?"

Victoria Brittain of the *Guardian* told of how the US TV network NMBC had censored the radical Democrat Party presidential aspirant Dennis Kucinich. NBC is owned by General Electric, which has commercial interests threatened by Kucinich's ecological policies, and the network barred him from a televised debate between Democrat candidates.

## 'Our work may be harder, but it is still worth doing'

**A** resounding and defiant statement of the right to report in the face of threats, dangers and commercial and political pressures came from a conference organised by the CPBF in London in January.

Alan Johnston, the BBC reporter held hostage in Gaza last year, said that many people in the Middle East now rejected the right of Western journalists to report, but affirmed: "Our work may be harder to do, but it certainly does remain profoundly worth doing."

The conference, "New Threats to Media Freedom", was organised in collaboration with the NUJ London Freelance Branch. More than 110 people crammed into a meeting room at the NUJ with an official capacity of 70. There were speakers on the law, official secrecy, freedom of information and the corporate power of media owners.

The keynote speaker was Alan Johnston, who began by thanking everyone who participated in and supported the powerful campaign for his release last summer. He said the argument that journalists were "merely

observers there to try to explain what's happening – that our work will in the end be to the benefit of some sort of justice", was wearing thin.

"In some places now it means very little indeed. On the night of March 12 last year, the first night of my captivity in Gaza, I made the argument for myself – and it counted for nothing. The leader of the Army of Islam said that I had made a nice speech, but that it would not set me free.

"The people who threaten, or abduct, or kill journalists – the angry or drunk soldier on a checkpoint, the party hard man, or the extremist kidnapper – aren't easily persuaded by reason and the wider moral picture. They move to different rhythms – motivated by ideology, or money, or the pursuit of power in their narrow, brutal world.

But unless the world's decision-makers, or electorates have a flow of information from places like Gaza, Iraq, Afghanistan and Somalia, they won't be equipped with the facts and understanding on which wise choices are made."

PHOTO: PENNIE QUINTON

## Appeal

## Media Ownership Project membership appeal

# Our target is £10,000

By Granville Williams

**T**he CPBF believes media ownership is a vital issue. When media are concentrated in the hands of powerful proprietors deep damage can be inflicted on democratic societies. Look at Italy, at the heart of the European Union, but with a media system dominated by Silvio Berlusconi. He will be standing again in the April election, with the odds on him winning.

One business leader, who supported Berlusconi in the 2001 election, said: "I supported Berlusconi because I thought he was pro-business. I didn't realise he was pro his own business."

In government Berlusconi, who owned three commercial television stations, was able to influence all the broadcast media. RAI, the public service broadcaster, stripped out critical programmes and became the microphone for his political power. Newspapers too came under indirect control with papers like *La Stampa*, owned by Fiat and dependent on government support, abandoning their independent watchdog role. Political opponents, fearful of Berlusconi, have also been unable to deliver reform of the media to eradicate his conflict of interests.

In the UK and the USA there is concern about Rupert Murdoch. When Murdoch officially took control of the *Wall Street Journal* in December 2007, Bill Moyers, the veteran US journalist, commented: "With the *Journal*, Fox Broadcasting Company, Fox News channel, and his new Fox Business Network, Murdoch now controls four of the major outlets that compete every day for the space in our heads. And when it comes to using his power for his own agenda, he's no shrinking violet."

Moyers then quoted from the *Journal* when it was still owned by the Bancroft family. It pointed out that Murdoch "has blurred a line that exists at many other US media companies... a line intended to keep the business and political interests of owners from influencing the presentation of news."

One crucial item is missing from the list of outlets Moyers cites that Murdoch uses to compete for "space in our heads" – Fox Interactive Media, owners of MySpace, which was purchased in July 2005 for \$580m, and part of the social networking phenomenon.

Long-standing concerns about the power and influence of media moguls in traditional media (film, television, radio, newspapers, books and magazines) now have to be revised to take in the big implications of converged media and the transition to multi-media and multi-platform (PC, mobile, interactive TV) systems.

Consolidation is occurring at an alarming rate, with \$30 billion spent in 2007 in mergers and acquisitions by Microsoft, Time Warner (AOL), Yahoo! and WPP on interactive advertising companies. And the stalled \$44.6 billion bid by Microsoft for Yahoo! in February highlights the con-

tinuing battle for dominance of the online advertising market. These are big media policy issues. The new information providers – search engine companies, telecom companies, internet service providers, and the like – play an important role in the selection, organisation and flow of information and therefore need to be brought into a new analysis of media ownership in the age of convergence.

Growing consolidation will undermine diversity of both content and ownership, and the transformation of the internet from an open, global means of communications into one designed primarily to serve the interests of corporate brands and commercialism.

Privacy will also be eroded as massive databases of information on internet users become more intrusive. For example, the Google/DoubleClick merger (not widely reported or analysed in the media) will be an information colossus that combines information about consumers that Google collects through its search engine with the tracking data that DoubleClick collects about users as they surf the net.

In debates on media ownership the powerful amplifying force of global media groups is deployed at national and European forums, relentlessly linking attacks on public service broadcasting, portrayed as anachronistic in the age of multi-channel TV and the internet, with intense lobbying to

abandon old-fashioned concepts of placing limits on media ownership.

That is why last year the CPBF launched its media ownership project to research the changing patterns of ownership in our rapidly converging media.

We have so far raised over £30,000 from Unison and the Open Society Institute, but we still need more cash to realise our plans.

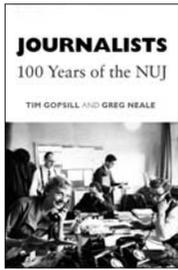
We want to:

- Chart the patterns of ownership which span converged communications media.
- Produce a clear set of relevant policies on media ownership for the UK and Europe.
- Challenge the oft-repeated mantra that media ownership is irrelevant in the age of the internet.
- Ask the questions and give the answers to what kind of regulation is required to protect public service content (news, children's programmes, documentaries) in the digital age.
- Produce a chart, popular campaigning pamphlet and book with the facts, arguments and analysis on media ownership.
- Hold a major conference to launch our policies in autumn 2008.
- Ensure that in the run-up to the next election our ideas are at the centre of political debate.

That's why we need you to dig deep and help us raise £10,000 to realise these plans. Please send your donations to the CPBF National Office.

**Growing consolidation will undermine diversity of both content and ownership, and the transformation of the internet from an open, global means of communications into one designed primarily to serve the interests of corporate brands and commercialism**

## Ton up



**JOURNALISTS: 100 YEARS OF THE NUJ**  
**Tim Gopsill and Greg Neale**  
 Profile Books, £17.99

By Tom O'Malley

**T**im Gopsill and Greg Neale have produced *Journalists: 100 Years of the NUJ* to mark the centenary of the National Union of Journalists in 2007. It is a lively read, clearly written and easy to follow. Tim Gopsill has edited the NUJ's monthly *Journalist* since 1988 and Greg Neale has worked for over 25 years in the industry.

Two previous histories of the NUJ have been written. These were by F. J. Mansfield, who produced *Gentlemen, the Press* (1941) and Clement Bundock's *The National Union of Journalists* (1957). The present authors make use of these sources, of back issues of the *Journalist*, NUJ papers and interviews. The book gives substantial attention to

industrial matters, pay claims, strikes and lockouts, covering the national and provincial press, public relations, magazines and broadcasting. It is divided into chapters which, rather than dealing with the history in a chronological fashion, group themes together and deal with each chronologically. The chapters cover the organisation of the Union, its role in pay and conditions, its links with the wider labour movement, international links and issues of media freedom. It includes accounts of the union's activities in Ireland, Scotland and Wales.

Although the book spans 100 years, much of the detail covers the period after 1957, the date of Bundock's publication. The material from the 60s, 70s and after uses more contemporary interview material than the earlier part. There is a great deal on the growth of chapel-based militancy in the 70s, and on the struggles around new technology and de-recognition since the 80s. The coverage of key issues, such as the *Real Lives* affair and the confrontation over the journalist's right to protect sources exemplified by the Bill Goodwin case.

The NUJ has had a complicated history. It has never organised all journalists, but has organised the majority in the industry. It has acted throughout on both matters of pay and conditions and on questions of media freedom. It is a key supporter of the CPBF. Journalism is not

a profession. It does not have a system of professional qualifications and self-regulation such as exists in areas like the law and medicine.

But the NUJ has had a code of conduct since 1936, and has taken a critical stance at times over the failure of the employers' system of self-regulation. The NUJ has had an ethics council since 1985. The book shows how difficult it is to assert workers' rights and "professional" standards in an industry where employers have jealously guarded their economic and editorial power.

Journalism is, in many senses, an individualistic profession, but it is also one with a strong tradition of trade unionism. This has led to tensions within the Union over the years. What is striking is the sheer tenacity of individuals, their commitment and energy in sustaining the organisation. It has managed in recent years to rebuild membership from a low of 22,000 in 1994 to 41,000 in 2006. The fact that 7,000 of the members in 2006 were student members testifies to a realistic and forward-looking approach to recruitment.

This is a committed piece of writing by two people who are both committed members of the union. It should be read as such and used by people interested in understanding the development of the media in the UK as a valuable source of argument, facts and insight.

## Enhancing media diversity

By Julian Petley

**I**n 2003, the CPBF and other NGOs blew the gaff on the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS), a World Trade Organisation (WTO) scheme to "liberalise" the global trade in services. This meant removing all governmental regulations deemed "barriers" to international trade and measures regarded as "interfering" with the market such as "discriminatory" government subsidies. This would have left services in developing countries entirely at the mercy of western service providers and destroyed the BBC licence fee and other forms of broadcasting support regarded by Murdoch and his ilk as "unfair" competition.

GATS stirred international counter-forces into action. This culminated in UNESCO's 2005 General Conference approving the Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions. By 2007 the Convention had gained enough signatories to achieve legal force. To date 78 states, including the UK, have signed.

The Convention rests on basic premises about cultural diversity; for example, that it is "an important factor that allows individuals and peoples to express and to share with others their ideas and values" and that "this

diversity is embodied in the uniqueness and plurality of the identities and cultural expressions of the peoples and societies making up humanity".

It recognises "the need to take measures to protect the diversity of cultural expressions, including their contents, especially in situations where cultural expressions may be threatened by the possibility of extinction or serious impairment", and emphasises that "cultural diversity is strengthened by the free flow of ideas, and that it is nurtured by constant exchanges and interaction between cultures".

The Convention is based on the idea that "cultural activities, goods and services have both an economic and a cultural nature, because they convey identities, values and meanings, and must therefore not be treated as solely having commercial value". A resounding shot across the WTO bows.

Signatories agree to protect and promote cultural diversity and remain open to cultural goods and services from other countries, especially those whose cultural industries are in need of protection and/or development. More specifically, they agree to "reaffirm the sovereign rights of States to maintain, adopt and implement policies and measures that they deem appropriate for the protection and promotion of the diversity of cultural

expressions on their territory".

Measures include:

- providing domestic independent cultural industries and activities in the informal sector effective access to the means of production, dissemination and distribution of cultural activities, goods and services;
- establishing and supporting public institutions, as appropriate;
- enhancing diversity of the media, including through public service broadcasting.

The Convention is partly aimed supporting the cultural industries of developing countries. But, it is also important to those fighting for the provision of indigenous, culturally-specific, public service media in countries such as the UK. One wonders if Ofcom considered it while formulating its plans to sell digital spectrum to the highest bidder.

Judging by the manner in which the Government ratified the Convention we can assume it hoped no-one would notice, thus enabling it to add it to the list of international obligations which it can choose to ignore or to fulfil minimally. It will be up to the growing UK Coalition for Cultural Diversity (of which the CPBF is a founder member) to loudly remind them of their commitments and bring these to the widest possible attention.

# Uncertainty for ITV over BSkyB

By Granville Williams

**W**hen BSkyB paid £690m for ITV shares in November 2006 it talked about "substantial potential for long-term value creation". Intense controversy surrounded the acquisition and most people agreed with Richard Branson that BSkyB's objective was to thwart Virgin Media's plan to takeover ITV, and stifle any potential competition before birth. It now looks like the decision by business secretary John Hutton to support the Competition Commission ruling is not the end of the affair.

BSkyB has until 24 February to appeal, but Andrew Edgecliffe-Johnson, media editor of the *Financial Times* writing on 17 February (as we went to press) thought such an appeal was likely. Even if such an appeal were to fail, the broadcaster will still have up to nine months to sell its shares.

The long timescale and uncertainty of

the process will inevitably impact on ITV's development. BSkyB has also written off £343m to reflect the fall in ITV's share price. So much for long-term value creation.

This episode highlights again the issue of media ownership and the dominant influence of BSkyB/News Corporation on the UK media which in the past through predatory pricing of newspapers or bidding to drive down the price of the ITN news contract with ITV sought to weaken competition. The Competition Commission report and the business secretary supported the sale of shares because the BSkyB stake "lessened competition" but dismissed the threat to media plurality.

Additionally the matter has exposed basic flaws in the Communications Act 2003 media ownership rules and the way the public interest considerations are handled. As Roy Greenslade pointed out in the *Evening Standard* the BSkyB shares

raid did not breach the Communications Act and if BSkyB does appeal "it will surely hinge on definitions of public interest and the way the regulator and the secretary of state have, to all intents and purposes, ignored the Act's specific provisions".

The Communications Act needs to be revised to specifically and unambiguously exclude powerful media groups from acquiring media holdings rather than rely on subjective public interest tests. Such a revision also needs to incorporate a broader analysis of media ownership and regulation as a result of new converged communication structures based around the Internet, telecoms and computers. And as the \$44.6bn (£22.65bn) bid for Yahoo! by Microsoft appears to stall, up pops Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation as an alternative bidder.

Updates may be found on the CPBF web site at: [www.cpbf.org.uk](http://www.cpbf.org.uk)

# Campaigners give evidence

By Tamsin Cave

**A**t the time of writing there have been two further evidence sessions of the public administration select committee inquiry into lobbying, with evidence given by both critics of the industry and the main trade bodies for the lobbying industry.

First up in front of the committee were representatives of the new campaign group, The Alliance for Lobbying Transparency (ALT). Giving evidence were Professor David Miller and Dr William Dinan of SpinWatch and the University of Strathclyde, and Peter Facey, director of Unlock Democracy.

ALT is an alliance of civil society groups, including CPBF, Friends of the Earth, Action Aid and Greenpeace, who are concerned about the growing influence of lobbying on decision-making in the UK. It is campaigning for the regulation of lobbyists, and improved ethics regulation for politicians and public officials to raise standards and restore public trust in decision-making.

Opening the first session, Peter said: "This inquiry is part of a wider discussion about the disconnection from politics and the political process. What's particularly worrying is the public perception that in politics powerful interest groups have a great deal more influence than ordinary voters."

Miller and Dinan made a case for lobbying transparency and ethics regulation, citing the recent example of Toast (the Obesity Awareness & Solutions Trust), a front group for a diet company which misled MPs over its sources of funding, and lobbying firm PPS, which has been accused of orchestrating fake letter writing lobbying campaigns.

Opinions from the committee members ranged from openly supportive to downright hostile. At one point former lobbyist, Charles Walker MP accused the witnesses of "subscribing to the view that politics is a grubby little business" and of feeding public cynicism, a claim that Peter Facey of Unlock Democracy strongly refuted.

Representatives of the main trade bodies for the lobbying industry argued for self-regulation. Giving evidence were Gill Morris chair of the Association of Professional Political Consultants, Rod Cartwright, head of the Public Relations Consultants Association's public affairs committee and Lionel Zetter, immediate past president of the Chartered Institute of Public Relations.

Questioning began in earnest with the return of Labour MP Paul Flynn. Having cited a number of cases of illegitimate or misleading behaviour by lobbyists – including paying Lords to

"pimp for certain causes" and buying access to Ministers – he put a key question to the witnesses: How do we control the behaviour of lobbyists that refuse to become members of your organisations and therefore opt out of self-regulation? Both Morris and Cartwright agreed that it was "unfortunate" that there are still major players that have chosen to stay outside the system.

After tough questioning, and few answers Flynn said: "We're not really getting to the truth on this." The purpose of lobbying he said is to "give extra advantages to the already advantaged."

When asked by David Heyes MP how it was that the witnesses were so convinced that their industry is clean when there is such a different perception among the public, Zetter replied that people "in the Dog and Duck... couldn't give a rat's arse about lobbyists."

Next to give evidence will be members of the Advisory Committee on Business Appointments on 21 February. Members of the Alliance for Lobbying Transparency have been invited by the committee to submit further evidence to the inquiry to support their call for lobbying transparency regulations.

For more info visit <http://www.lobbyingtransparency.org>

## Obituary

# Jimmy Barnes

By Granville Williams

Readers of *Free Press* won't know much about Jimmy Barnes who died of an aneurysm aged 57 on December 30 2007. That is unless they were involved in politics (Jimmy was in the Communist Party), trade unions (to my knowledge he was in at least three – Amicus, GPMU and NUJ) and the magazine he produced, *Trade Union Review* (which cast a critical eye over the more reprehensible antics of trade union leaders), or Trade Union CND (which he devoted much of his time and energy to).

Jimmy cared passionately about books and ideas. In 2005 he acquired The Queens pub in Church, Lancashire with its wet and dry rot. It was an awesome financial challenge – which he met by working as a maintenance engineer in Accrington. Jimmy was a socialist who mixed philosophy and trades unionism with an awesome range of practical skills. He took on The Queens because he had a vision. The pub would open, profits would fund a socialist and trade union library, his staff would be trained and paid properly – and his beer would be cheap. And it all happened.

Jimmy was born in Carlisle, the son of working-class Communist Party members. His education was marked by dyslexia, and his mother fiercely resisted proposals to send him to a special school. Apprenticed as an engineer in Carlisle in 1966, he worked for London Underground and in Sunderland for the

National Coal Board. From 1977 he studied philosophy and politics at Sunderland Polytechnic, and into the mid-80s he was active in the Young Communist League and the Communist Party.

Jimmy's finances in the late 1980s, when I got to know him, were precarious. Living on benefits and erratic funding, he devoted his energies to Trade Union CND and *Trade Union Review*. Both projects generated hostility but Jimmy had the knack of identifying issues that ended up as *Guardian* news stories. In 2000 he revived the NUJ branch in Carlisle, having moved back there to be with his parents.

Amid the chaos of the birth of his pub, he still found time to set up B&D

Publishing. This launched with a reprint of Friedrich Schlotterbeck's Left Book Club title *The Darker the Night, the Brighter the Stars* (1947) on German workers' resistance to the Nazis. In 2005 he asked me to write an introduction to John Milton's *Areopagitica: for the Liberty of Unlicensed Printing*. In mid-December we were discussing his plans to resume his PhD thesis on Wittgenstein and reprint another Left Book Club title, Ralph Korngold's *Citizen Toussaint*, which in his memory we intend to publish.

I count myself lucky to have known and worked with Jimmy. His resilience, humour, and principled, selfless commitment to politics and trade union activity were all deeply impressive.

## CPBF AGM 2008

This year's AGM will be held on Saturday 19 July from 10am at:

NUJ Headquarters  
Headland House  
308-312 Gray's Inn Road  
London WC1X 8DP

Please make a note in your diary  
Further details in the next issue of *Free Press*

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