

FREE Press

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Journal of the Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom

FRIGHTENED OF ITS OWN SHADOW

The BBC's refusal to broadcast the Gaza appeal speaks volumes about its bias, writes **Tim Gopsill**

You might not generally look to crooner Will Young for political insights, but when he appeared on *BBC Question Time* on 5 February, answering a question on the corporation's refusal to air the Gaza appeal, he summed up the problem in one short sentence: "The BBC is frightened of its own shadow."

Perhaps he could have said "its responsibilities", but the truth is the same, that BBC managers are so punch-drunk from the battering they constantly receive that they cannot take even such an easy decision as broadcasting a charity appeal, for fear that it will lead to yet more controversy.

So poor is their judgement that the effect was the exact opposite. Had they run the Disasters Emergency Committee (DEC) appeal no-one, not even the most ardent Zionist, would have complained, because the other channels ran it as well. As it was, they brought the heaviest public onslaught the BBC has ever had, and this time well deserved.

Mark Thompson and his managers were incapable even of defending the decision sensibly. They said they had consulted their own charity appeals advisory committee, which was not true. They held a staged-managed staff meeting and told the few who defeated the obstacles to attending that there were "no innocent victims" in this war and that the DEC were "ambitious individuals" who called the appeal in defiance of the BBC's better judgement.

But their principal argument of course was that the broadcast would



Gaza, December 2008: most coverage came from a local TV news agency, Ramattan

As John Pilger has reminded us, the BBC has never bothered about its impartiality with past appeals

have been in breach of the statutory BBC requirement of impartiality, because, the BBC said, "Gaza remains a major ongoing news story" – unlike Kosovo, Congo, Burma or Darfur presumably. By definition, DEC appeals are launched at the height of major news stories, which are likely to be contentious.

As John Pilger has reminded us, the BBC has never bothered about its

impartiality with these past appeals. The 1999 appeal for the refugees in Kosovo was actually presented by the late BBC darling Jill Dando; indeed the Serbian regime of Slobodan Milosevic was actually blamed by some for her murder as a result. The NATO bombing campaign was certainly contentious – in truth, it was illegal but the Kosovars, unlike the wretched Palestinians, were "on our side" so we could be biased for them.

For this is what the BBC blunder has achieved: it has manifested a bias towards Israel. As the general secretaries of the main unions, the NUJ and BECTU, put it in their protest letter to Mark Thompson: "Far from avoiding the compromise of the BBC's impartial-

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Twenty-five years after

The CPBF has produced a book to mark the 25th anniversary of the 1984-85 miners' strike. Its editor, **Granville Williams**, explains why



The 1984-85 miners' strike was the most bitterly contested industrial dispute in twentieth-century British labour history. For the Thatcher Government the defeat of the miners meant a political agenda of privatisation, deregulation and attacks on the trade union movement could move ahead virtually unimpeded.

The new political era was summed up well by Joe Owens, a former miner, in his introduction to *Miners 1984-1994*: "These times would come to be characterised by the 'management's right to manage'; telephone digit salaries for the chairmen of privatised natural resources and the abolition of wages councils; the return of mass unemployment and the emergence of Guinness as a cure for dementia; the marketing of UK plc as the home of low wages and the strictest anti-trade union legislation outside Turkey..."

It was inevitable that the sheer scale of the struggle would lead to a flow of

books, documentaries and plays dealing with the strike, and local newspapers in mining communities producing special supplements recording the occasion. This happened on both the tenth and twentieth anniversaries of the strike, but I sense a great deal more media interest in the twenty-fifth anniversary of the strike, or the "silver jubilee" as some stalwarts call it.

It is easy to see why. Thatcherism ushered in the age of excess, and New Labour continued to support the same policies of flexible labour markets and deregulation of financial services. It was Peter Mandelson, after all, who assured us he was "intensely relaxed about people getting filthy rich".

We witnessed the neglect of industry, so that with the exception of a few tiny pockets, the UK economy, as the political economist F. William Engdahl points out, is "a hollowed out wreck. It's really a service economy now".

Now the consequences of those poli-

cies are for all to see. We have the worst financial crisis since the Great Depression, caused by the rush for easy profits of commercial and investment banks, hedge funds, insurance companies, private equity firms and other financial institutions. Governments give massive bailouts for banks, whilst recession and mass unemployment loom ever larger.

What a contrast with the way the miners were treated. The Thatcher and Major Governments rigged the energy market through the dash for gas and nuclear energy and spent billions of pounds destroying the mining industry in an act of political revenge. The consequences for mining communities, in terms of long-term unemployment, ill-health, poverty and crime, have been devastating. But to cap it all we are now near the end of North Sea oil and gas and face the prospect of insecure energy supplies.

On the twenty-fifth anniversary we can re-assess what the strike was about. I think Geoffrey Goodman, then the industrial editor of the *Mirror*, captured it best in *The Miners' Strike*. He pointed out the dispute was "unique in terms of conventional industrial conflict. It was not about the pay packet; it was not about working conditions, hours of work, or even in the normal sense, a traditional conflict with management... the future of work was at the core of it. To remove a pit from a mining community is to snap the lifeline to a job". It was certainly not about the absurdity that one man, Arthur Scargill, kept, against their will and in spite of all efforts by the National Coal Board and the Government, 100,000 miners and their families out on strike for the best part of a year.

Shafted: The Media, the Miners' Strike and the Aftermath captures a number of different aspects of the strike and the

CPBF members book offer

Shafted is on sale for £9.99 (£12.50 inc P&P) CPBF members can order the book for £10.00 inc P&P from the National Office. Please send a cheque for £10.00 payable to CPBF with your name and address and mark your order "CPBF book offer".

Leeds book launch/public meeting

Thursday 12 March 7.30pm Congreve Room West Yorkshire Playhouse Leeds
Roy Bailey, the acclaimed veteran folk singer, will start the event, followed by "Pirhanas or Professionals – Journalists and the Miners' Strike": Nicholas Jones (Industrial Reporter BBC Radio during the strike); Peter Lazenby (Industrial Correspondent Yorkshire Evening Post); Chris Kitching (Secretary, National Union of Mineworkers); Granville Williams (editor *Shafted*); Representative from Women Against Pit Closures

London book launch

Evening of Wednesday 8 April at the performance of *Maggie's End*, Shaw Theatre, 100/110 Euston Road, London NW1 2AJ.

For further details and tickets contact the CPBF on 0208 521 5932 or email: freepress@cpbf.org.uk

News

consequences of defeat. Huw Beynon, for example, explores what happened to the South Wales and Durham coalfields after the strike. But the main focus of the book is on the media and the miners. Tony Harcup writes about alternative media in the miners' strike; Nicholas Jones, Peter Lazenby and Paul Routledge reflect on their experiences reporting the strike; and Michael Bailey and Julian Petley analyse an iconic photo from Orgreave of a mounted policeman wield-

ing his baton above a woman's head. They interview both the photographer (John Harris) and the woman (Leslie Boulton) and produce a fascinating account of the subsequent use and abuse of the photo. There is also a 32 page insert of photos, cartoons and other images from the strike.

From my point of view, putting the book together has been a fascinating experience, meeting new people, re-reading the literature on the strike, and

tracking down the very powerful North Selby NUM banner which is on the cover of the book. We plan to have it on display at the West Yorkshire Playhouse when we have the book launch and public meeting on 12 March.

We also have a website: <http://www.cpbf.org.uk/shafted> where people can order the book, find out about events planned around it, and view other material on the miners' strike.

'End harassment of Sri Lankan journalists' – IFJ

By Barry White

The International Federation of Journalists has called on the Sri Lanka's government to act decisively to end the campaign of intimidation of local and foreign media, and to acknowledge the right of citizens to free and fair access to diverse sources of information about matters of extreme importance to all Sri Lankans. It attacked the warning issued by Sri Lanka's defence secretary that foreign media organisations would face "dire consequences" and be "chased out" of the country if they did not behave "responsibly". On 1 February defence secretary Gotabaya Rajapaksa accused three international news organisations – CNN, Al-Jazeera and the BBC – of partisan reporting on the situation regarding civilian casualties and suffering in areas of conflict between government forces and Tamil separatist insurgents.

Rajapaksa also reportedly targeted foreign diplomatic staff and international non-government organisations, which he suggested were giving the insurgency by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) undue sustenance at a time when the LTTE was facing decisive defeat. His warning came as a sharp deterioration in the media freedom environment in Sri Lanka over the past month coincides with the government claiming its most significant successes in the country's long-running civil war.

A climate of anxiety now pervades the local media, and

several of Sri Lanka's most well-known journalists have left the country fearing for their lives.

IFJ general secretary Aidan White called said that "Sri Lanka's government and authorities are reminded that United Nations Security Council Resolution 1738 obliges all states to be aware that the targeting of journalists in situations of armed conflict is a violation of international humanitarian law."

In January the International Press Freedom Mission condemned a "culture of impunity and indifference" over killings and attacks on journalists in Sri Lanka. Since the beginning of the year, the killing of a senior editor and the attack on a popular independent TV channel have led to a total paralysis of the media community.

Launching a new report, *Media Under Fire: Press Freedom Lockdown in Sri Lanka*, the International Mission criticised Sri Lanka's government over its inaction and failure to take the attacks, murder and assassination of reporters seriously. This had in turn led to an almost total blackout of independent and objective reporting from the North and East of Sri Lanka, which have seen the worst of the country's long-running civil war.

"In all the cases of attacks against media and assassinations of reporters, there are few serious investigations by the authorities and none of the killers are ever brought to trial," the Mission said in a joint statement.



Sri Lanka protest: Tamils in London object to BBC coverage

"A hostile environment of intolerance propelled forward by the top political leadership has created a culture of impunity and indifference, making every day hunting season for attacks on media staff."

On 6 January, the studio of the Maharaja Television/Broadcasting Network (MTV/MBC) was attacked by armed gunmen. On 8 January, Lasantha Wickramatunga, editor of the *Sunday Leader*, was shot dead by two men on a motorcycle as he drove to work in Colombo. On 15 January, police began a widespread search for MTV Channel 1 chief Chevaan Daniel after accusations of him being behind the attack on his station.

According to the findings of the International Mission, reporters and editors conveying messages that are

critical of the government's war against the LTTE are labelled as "traitors" and "terrorists" and they work in an increasingly hostile environment of censorship and fear.

The Mission expressed its shocked at the repeated instances of elected representatives and government ministers using violent and inflammatory language against media workers and institutions. Not surprisingly this has led to widespread self-censorship among journalists in order to protect their lives.

"The killing of Lasantha and the deaths of at least eight other journalists, along with two disappeared since 2007, illustrates in painful detail just how journalists and media staff continue to suffer for their profession," the Mission said.

Public trust in press and PCC declining

By Barry White

Press intrusion and inaccurate reporting are on the increase, according to a report by the Media Standards Trust (MST), and because the recession has forced newspapers to make cutbacks, with some papers sacrificing standards to maintain sales, the situation is getting worse.

A More Accountable Press, published on 9 February, was produced by the MST in consultation with a group made up of leading figures from journalism and civil society. It finds that the system of self-regulation administered by the Press Complaints Commission (PCC) cannot deal with serious and growing threats to press standards and freedoms. The report argues the current system is insufficiently effective, largely unaccountable, opaque, and fails to reflect the changing media environment. At a time when news organisations are under enormous pressures, the temptation to run inaccurate or intrusive stories is growing, and the PCC appears to be unwilling or unable to do anything about this situation. Increasingly, the victims of this kind of journalism are bypassing the PCC in favour of the courts, leading to legal precedents which could constrain media freedom to an unacceptable degree.

Public trust in journalism, already extremely low, appears to be declining still further. Research commissioned by the MST for the report found that only seven per cent of the public trust national newspapers to behave responsibly, 75 per cent of people think newspapers knowingly publish inaccurate stories and 70 per cent believe there are "far too many instances of people's privacy being invaded by newspaper journalists". Six in ten people think the Government should do more to stop journalists intruding in people's private lives.

Martin Moore, director of the MST, said: "Without urgent reform we believe that self-regulation of the press will become increasingly ineffective at both protecting the public and promoting good journalism."

Julian Petley, chair of the CPBF, welcomed the report and said: "It backs up what we have been saying for many years, and we very much hope that the department for culture, media and sport will take careful note of its contents."

The report is available online at: www.mediastandardstrust.org

Public service broadcasting 'at the crossroads'

CPBF experts evaluate the new report by Ofcom on the future of British broadcasting

Ofcom messes up in Scotland, Wales and the regions

By Tom O'Malley

In Ofcom's "final statement and recommendations" ITV plc is being effectively allowed to withdraw from providing news and non-news programming. The situation in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland is looking extremely messy. S4C in Wales has muddied the waters even further.

Ofcom argues there has to be "an alternative model" for the provision of news in the devolved nations and the English regions. This is because ITV plc can no longer afford to provide these services. A fund of £30m-£50m is needed for this. The news "could be secured through a competitive tender amongst any news providers". It would go out on ITV, or its successor, or Channel 4.

Non-news programming might be provided by a competitive funding model in Northern Ireland and Wales, and through a new public service broadcasting channel in Scotland. Ofcom thinks the Government "should consider funding specific approaches in each of the devolved nations".

The report lists a range of funding sources. Partnerships with the BBC; using access to spectrum, spectrum changes, and funds from devolved Governments. Even using "funding currently deployed in digital switchover".

The use of money currently embedded in the BBC's licence fee to fund digital switchover would constitute a form of "top-slicing". Add

to this the idea that the BBC provide "an agreed level of pooled coverage and technical infrastructure" to its competitors in the area of news in the nations and devolved regions, and the pressures on the BBC's finances are clear.

In Wales, S4C has dropped a bombshell. In evidence it chose, and Ofcom agreed, not to publish it recommended a major change to its relationship to the BBC. S4C has always had its Welsh language news provided by BBC Wales. S4C now wants to put contracts for Welsh and English language news out to tender. This outstrips S4C's current remit as a Welsh language broadcaster.

It was done without any consultation with the BBC. Menna Richards, controller BBC Wales, issued a "strongly worded memo" to staff about the topic.

She pointed out that the "new proposal has alarmed and unsettled many colleagues... who fear that the BBC might be asked to withdraw from Welsh language television for the first time in 50 years". Tendering the BBC's provision would mean the privatisation of that service.

Ofcom has come up with a characteristically flawed set of proposals. Firstly it is pushing the BBC into more partnership deals with the private sector. This would marketise yet more of the BBC's core activities.

Secondly it is bowing to ITV. If ITV will not deliver, Ofcom should advertise the contracts now and channel public funds into supporting the new services until they are established. Finally, the mess that Ofcom has made of its handling of TV in the nations and regions is another reason why we need to push for a radical overhaul of that partisan and inadequate organisation.

Regulation

Our familiar Channel 4 or a 'new entity'?

By Patricia Holland

The new Ofcom *Review of Public Service Broadcasting* is a document torn between short-term proposals and long-term proposals. Ed Richards, chief executive of Ofcom, was apocalyptic in his presentation to the Oxford Media Convention: "British broadcasting is at a crossroads. Unless it moves to adapt to the huge digital opportunities of broadband, mobility and interactivity, its relevance will decline." "Public service broadcasting," he continued, "will be an anachronism but public service content should not be".

This shift in emphasis from channels to "content" has influenced Ofcom's short-term proposals for Channel 4. Launched in 1982 with a remit to provide what the other channels did not, the channel shook up television in the UK. But it found its remit increasingly difficult to sustain. Nevertheless it is an essential ingredient of the public service mix, with its hybrid status as a not-for-profit public trust, funded by advertising revenue. But now, in the rush to an all-digital environment, it is about to run out of money.

Its alternatives, as outlined by Ofcom, are stark. The most pessimistic scenarios would be a "managed decline", in which the channel quietly fades away, or privatisation, ditching any public service commitment. Other options include direct public funding, which is unlikely in the present climate, but, in any case would come with all the drawbacks of dependency on the Government; and money from the BBC's licence fee.

Other possibilities are a merger with Five – which would certainly create problems, considering the different structure and aims of the two channels, and Ofcom's preferred option, "a new entity with Channel 4 at its heart".

One of the main thrusts of the Ofcom document is the need for a "second institution" to balance the power of the BBC,

Ofcom's aim is to provide 'an alternative voice to the BBC rather than sustaining Channel 4 as an end in itself'. Its preferred way of achieving this is for the channel to be part of a 'relationship' with BBC Worldwide

whose licence fee funding is secured – at least for the moment. Ofcom has come to recognise the strength of audience support for the current plural system, and the need to secure provision beyond the BBC. Yet it refuses to support ITV as a part of a public service system, and its proposal for a "public service publisher" failed to take off. That leaves Channel 4.

Ofcom's aim is to provide "an alternative voice to the BBC rather than sustaining Channel Four as an end in itself". Its preferred way of achieving this is for the channel to be part of a "relationship" with the BBC's commercial arm BBC Worldwide.

It is up to the Government to implement any changes, and these will largely depend on recommendations from the *Digital Britain* report, which also stresses "content" rather than "channels". So does this mean that Channel 4, as an independent entity is likely to disappear? Probably. Will it ensure a continuation of innovative programming which has the courage to address small audiences? That remains to be seen.



Ofcom chief executive Ed Richards: apocalyptic tone in Oxford speech

Little cheer in Northern Ireland

By Seamus Dooley, NUJ Irish Organiser

While the Ofcom report provided little cheer, in Northern Ireland the report was broadly welcomed because it represents a small but extremely significant change from the original recommendations in relation to the amount of local programming required at Ulster Television (UTV).

Ofcom has recommended that the level of non-news programmes on the station should still be two hours per week and not one and a half as originally proposed. There are no plans to cut news.

Ofcom has responded to a joint NUJ/ BECTU campaign, which culminated in a debate in the Northern Assembly and a petition signed by all political leaders in Northern Ireland. This rare display of unity reflects the special role of UTV in Northern Ireland.

While BBC is certainly valued, the public service role of UTV enjoy a level of cross community support which has not always been appreciated either by Ofcom or, bizarrely, by local management.

Throughout November and December, UTV management enforced redundancies on the basis of the original Ofcom recommendation, which was viewed as a "done done".

The trade unions did not accept that the Ofcom review should be used as justification for slashing jobs. Management persisted and the result is that UTV has lost some of the company's finest broadcasters. The decision to break up the *Insight* team reflects the lack of commitment to investigative journalism and the move to cheap, populist programming.

***Insight* was described by the company as "UTV's flagship current affairs programme, producing hard-edged investigations and political analysis" with, "a dedicated team of reporters and producers, who have built up a reputation for uncompromising and award-winning journalism."**

The loss of *Insight* is a major blow. Despite the Ofcom report, management continues to demand redundancies and the situation remains bleak, cutting up to one third of jobs in the TV sector.

What the Ofcom recommendation has done is illustrated the power of community campaigns in defence of public service broadcasting.

The NUJ welcomes Ofcom's recognition of the importance of a local news service in Ireland. However, the concept of a tendering process for a new local news model could be very dangerous and could undermine the public service broadcasting rather than enhance local broadcasting. We still believe that a Media Commission is necessary to examine all aspects of broadcasting, including the question of long-term funding for indigenous language programming.

News and reviews

MPs call for new register for lobbyists

By Tamasin Cave

The New Year arrived with a bang for British lobbyists. The public administration select committee (PASC) concluded its inquiry into lobbying with the recommendation that the Government should introduce a statutory register of lobbying activity. After 18 months of investigation, the influential group of MPs deemed that "reform is necessary."

"There is a public interest in knowing who is lobbying whom about what" said PASC Chairman, Tony Wright MP. The proposed register would record the names of those lobbying and their employers or clients. It would also put in the public domain details of meetings between lobbyists and officials.

It's an attempt by MPs to do something about what Wright describes as "the famous culture of secrecy in Government." Do nothing", the report warns, and the Government risks

increasing public mistrust and "solidifying the impression that it listens to favoured groups – big business and party donors in particular – with far more attention than it gives to others."

The plans were welcomed by The Alliance for Lobbying Transparency. David Miller said: "This report shows that the status quo is clearly no longer an option... The public has a right to know which groups are bending its ear to influence policy."

Some in the industry reacted defensively, especially those charged with overseeing the system of self-regulation. However, other senior lobbyists were more optimistic. Weber Shandwick UK public affairs chairman Jon McLeod said regulation was "should hold no fear for the lobbying industry".

Just three weeks later the cash-for-legislation scandal in the House of Lords broke. Four peers were caught by the *Sunday Times*, allegedly willing to accept payment for "working behind the scenes" as one of them put it, to influence Parliament. More serious than the cash-for-questions scandal that hit the Commons over decade ago, the story turned public attention on the business of influence. The industry's claim that the public doesn't "give a rats arse" about lobbying suddenly seemed out of step.

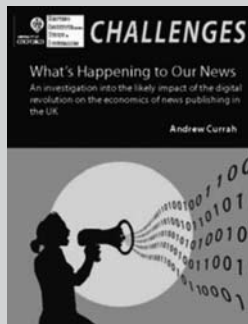
A roundtable discussion, organised by the three industry bodies, sought to find a way forward for lobbyists in the wake of the PASC report. Chaired by the *Guardian's* Westminster correspondent David Hencke, it brought lobbyists together with MPs, Peers, civil servants from the cabinet office and others, including the Law Society, CBI, and Charities Commission.

The industry's assertions that self-regulation is robust - but could be improved - seemed to fall on deaf ears. The overwhelming majority of invited guests supported PASC recommendation for a statutory register.

The message will hopefully be carried to the cabinet office where Tom Watson is considering the Government's response. Early indications are that measures to improve transparency in lobbying are being considered. Let's hope that they agree with MP John Grogan's advice to the industry: "Isn't it simplest to embrace a statutory register?"

Gordon Prentice MP has tabled an Early Day Motion calling on the Government to introduce a statutory register of lobbying activity. Ask your MP to sign the petition at: www.foe.co.uk/campaigns/corporates/press_for_change/influences_government_12613.html

Guide to the online age



WHAT'S HAPPENING TO OUR NEWS
Andrew Currah
 Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism

By Nicholas Jones

Andrew Currah deserves to be commended for providing an insight into the evolving world of online journalism. He fears the clickstream of consumption for news and information will increasingly shape the content of websites to the detriment of the wider public interest.

In the multi-media hubs of newspapers investing in digital output, the most popular stories are indicated on display screens. Real-time feedback is determining the allocation of news room resources.

Research for *What's Happening to Our News* was conducted by Oxford's

Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism and Currah says their findings show the impact of the clickstream has forced news publishers to huddle together under "the umbrella of sensationalist and popular stories".

Even the websites of quality daily papers such as the *Guardian*, the *Times* and the *Daily Telegraph* have adopted a "tabloid-like style" and are offering entirely new categories of coverage such as "celebrity", "lifestyle" and "weird".

As broadcasters expand their text-based coverage and newspapers diversify into video and audio, they are converging on a central playing field where competition is likely to be intense. The danger is that news publishers will be reduced to what Currah considers will be the "digital equivalent of a windsock", buffeted one way and another by the prevailing direction of whichever items attract the most hits.

So rapid has been the rate of convergence that the author can be forgiven for having failed to keep pace with the way newspapers have succeeded in recent months in commanding the news agenda not just in the press but also in broadcasting and the internet by posting sensational video footage on their sites.

Whether it was Prince Harry's controversial home video or the

secretly-filmed interview with an errant member of the House of Lords, it was the news-making ability of the newspapers which had the broadcasters dancing to their tune, desperate to transmit their surreptitiously-obtained footage.

Currah confidently asserts that the European audio-visual media services directive "will certainly have a bearing" on the content of video-enabled newspaper websites when it comes to determining the effective regulation of their digital output.

Again events have moved on, as it now transpires that the press proprietors have made sure their online output will remain out of reach of interference by the European Union.

Not only has Ofcom agreed that newspaper videos should be self-regulated under the guidance of the Press Complaints Commission, but it has also sided with the proprietors in accepting that a series of video clips – for example on Sun tv – do not constitute a "television-like" service within the terms of the directive.

What's Happening to our News will need updating once more evidence emerges of the degree to which the broadcasters' long-established rules regarding intrusion and impartiality are undermined by the more sensational audio-visual output of newspapers and the almost inevitable lowering in standards that will follow.

News and letters

LETTER

China is not communist

I was appalled at the masthead picture that accompanied the article on "The Long March to Press Freedom" in issue No 166. I was also confused, as nowhere in the article was there a single reference to the figures in the picture, Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin and Mao. This appears to be an example of the sort of dubious association that *Free Press* has itself criticised in the mainstream media; in fact, Greg Philo's article in the same issue commented on a parallel example involving TV News and Northern Rock.

It is not clear whether the choice of illustration was made by the author or by someone involved in the production of the journal. Whoever it was needs to study some political history and political economy. He or she could start with that much misquoted text, *The German Ideology*.

"The fact is, therefore, that definite individuals who are productively active in a definite way enter into these definite social and political relations. Empirical observation must in each separate instance bring out empirically and without any mystification and speculation, the connection of the social and political structure with production." [OUP 1977 edition].

The constant but erroneous description of the Chinese state as socialist or communist is one that

uncritically swallows the surface appearances without studying the actual social relations. It serves the interests of the Chinese ruling class to propagate this myth. A parallel example would be the recycling in the recent US election of the myth "from the log cabin to the White House". In the case of China the actual social relations include the relentless pursuit of surplus value and the auctioning off of the Chinese proletariat to international capital. All of the leaders implicitly maligned in the masthead would have vocally criticised such a reactionary state.

Since Marx himself was a journalist perhaps *Free Press* could extend its defence of press freedoms to the ideas of this seminal thinker.

KEITH WITHALL
Leeds

Broadband for all by 2012 – and then what?

The Government's *Digital Britain* report is a massive disappointment, argue **Gary Herman** and **Barry White**

A new era with broadband internet for all is outlined in the Government's interim report on *Digital Britain*, published at the end of January. The report echoes the pledge made by Tony Blair in 2004, that all Britain should have access to high-speed broadband by 2008.

The report, launched by the departments for business enterprise and regulatory reform and culture, media and sport contains 22 recommendations, including commitments to upgrade and modernise wired, wireless and broadcast infrastructure and secure the future of Channel 4 as the second public service broadcaster.

Much of the report is couched in the language of the market. "Britain's competitive position as a user and producer of digital technology cannot be taken for granted". Britain has lost ground to competitors in the past 10 years due to lack of investment and the situation needed urgent action.

That's where the problems begin. Is this digital vision to be funded as a public service or in these times of economic downturn as a commercial venture by the telecoms industry? The *Observer* noted on the 25 January that the previous week's dire profit warning from BT had put the company's plans to build a new super-fast broadband network for 10 million homes in jeopardy.

"The warning also appears to have

made it critical that the rest of the telecoms industry now help meet the estimated £3.5bn cost of realising the government's ambition to bring some form of broadband to every home by 2012." It is clear that the Government will be asked to underwrite or guarantee some or all of the investment needed.

The report comes in for criticism from a number of directions. Writing in the *Media Guardian* on 2 February, Jack Schofield, the paper's computer editor criticises its comments about digital audio broadcasting (DAB) as "scarily out of touch", when pretty much everyone accepts that the future is internet-based radio. DAB is a bit of a backwater and even community groups are now applying for analogue FM spectrum to develop local radio stations.

The report proposes a review of cross-media ownership rules for the local and regional media sector, which could lead to greater consolidation of

Its vision of the digital future as a consumer paradise, with no real consideration of the wider social context and impact of new media, seems doomed to failure

ownership. This was welcomed by Bob Satchwell from the Society of Editors, "as is the encouragement of debate about how news is provided, but changes must not be delayed by calls for new evidence".

But the report does not solve the problems of the digital divide and social exclusion. It estimates that in the UK some 17m people over 15 are not using computers and the internet. Even if the Government achieves its objective of getting broadband into every home by 2012, just how do they proposed to secure take up by the elderly and poorer families on low incomes who are currently the lowest users?

The report says; "We need to build the awareness of the benefits of internet technology to enhance the life chances of all. Otherwise inequality in the use and application of digital technologies is potentially a significant new driver of social exclusion in the 21st century, which risks accelerating existing social divides and creating new ones." The report does not offer any real vision about how this might be overcome or how to encourage internet use. It is this crucial issue which the report and the Government have yet to tackle radically and effectively.

Even in its own terms, the report sets Britain firmly on a downward path. Its vision of the digital future as a consumer paradise, with no real thought to supporting the hardware and software industries that actually create the conditions for growth, no real consideration of the wider social context and impact of new media, and apparently barely any understanding of innovation or technological change, seems doomed to failure.

The *Digital Britain* report is available at: [www.culture.gov.uk/what we do/broadcasting/5631.aspx](http://www.culture.gov.uk/what_we_do/broadcasting/5631.aspx)

Feedback and comments on the report by 12 March. Details from: digitalbritain@berr.gsi.gov.uk

News

SPECIAL OFFER
The Dream that Died –
the rise and fall of ITV

A unique, insider account by Ray Fitzwalter, the former editor of *World in Action*, of what has happened to British Television seen through the events that affected Granada Television and ITV with many references to the BBC and Channel 4 from 1980 to 2007.

Based on 90 exclusive interviews and fully illustrated (see review by Granville Williams in *Free Press* 167).

Free Press readers can purchase the soft-back edition for £10.00 plus £2.28 P&P (saving £4.99). Simply send a cheque to the author, Ray Fitzwalter at 115 Holcombe Old Road, Holcombe, Bury, Lancashire. BL8 4NF giving a delivery address. A copy will be dispatched by return.

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ity, this move has breached those same BBC rules by showing a bias in favour of Israel at the expense of 1.5 million Palestinian civilians suffering an acute humanitarian crisis.”

Much has been said and written about the BBC buckling under the pressure of pro-Israeli lobbying, but that is not the crucial factor. Its journalists are said to be intimidated by the threat of accusations of anti-Semitism, but no journalist is worried by that, despite the floods of messages they do receive.

It suits the Israelis to be able to say they can whip the BBC into line because demonstrating its power is what Israel loves to do, but the truth is rather different: the BBC conforms, not specifically with Israeli aggression, but with the general consensus of the western security establishment.

This consensus holds that liberal democratic values are in a global struggle against undemocratic and violent forces, and military action in defence of our values cannot be questioned. Despite public opinion’s persistent opposition to the adventures in Iraq and Afghanistan, anti-war voices are almost totally excluded from the airwaves.

The BBC is besotted with the USA as the defender of western values, and Israel falls within the western embrace, so it must be defended.

The BBC is the biggest employer of journalists in the western world, with more than 3,000 of them, and is dangerous to generalise about their output, because it is so varied. Many are brilliant and independently minded, and

they can report critically on all manner of political phenomena, but when it comes to what the BBC perceives as national security they have to watch their step.

The corporation has always been rather like this – in wartime it invariably slides into a kind of ministry of information mode – but since the trauma of the Hutton report it has got much worse. The last week of January was actually the fifth anniversary of that crisis, though no-one marked it publicly. There should have been some kind of commemoration, because that was the week in 2004 when the BBC lost its director-general, the chairman of its governors – and its nerve.

It is their hapless successors that are at fault, not the corporation itself. This is a distinction that protestors against their decisions should bear in mind: refusing to pay the licence fee, for instance, as some on the left have threatened, is shooting at the wrong goal.

No, the BBC’s bosses are not pro-Israel, they are not racist, they are not particularly right-wing, they are just cowards. Despite having the might of one of the world’s most powerful media organisations behind them they don’t have the guts to stand up for its independence from Government or their responsibilities to the public.

The real disaster emergency is at the BBC itself. Let’s have an appeal to save it from its own bosses. It won’t be the first time that the staff, their unions and groups like CPBF have had to fight to put some backbone into them, nor the last.

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

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