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FIDDLERS AND THE TRUTH

The *Daily Telegraph's* revelations on UK MPs' expenses have been a shot in the arm for British democracy and the press. They have sold millions of papers and restored popular confidence in journalism – an amazing reversal of the recent trend.

The story started not with the massive investment of a national paper but the determination of a single-minded freelance. Heather Brooke is an American reporter who came to Britain and was outraged by the official secrecy and obstruction to journalists' enquiries here. She became a campaigner for freedom of information, and in the process launched the investigation into MPs' second home allowances.

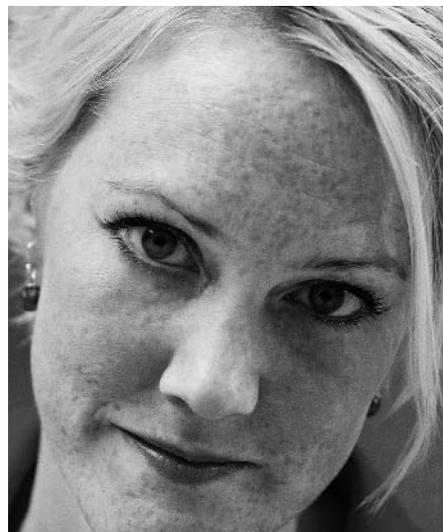
She told **Tim Gopsill** the whole story.

It was at the NUJ's annual conference in Belfast in April last year that Heather Brooke picked up the first trickle of the flood that was to inundate the British Parliamentary system just over a year later. As an investigative journalist from the USA working in London on a mission to introduce the American "freedom of information" culture into British journalism she received the first information ever published on the allowances that MPs had claimed to cover the cost of their second homes.

As the Annual Delegate Meeting droned on in the ballroom of Belfast's Europa Hotel – a significant place for journalists as the much-bombed home of reporters covering the 25-year civil war in Northern Ireland – Heather Brooke set up her laptop on a cocktail table in the bar to download the pages of facts and figures from the House of Commons.

It was not, of course, the full deal. The information covered only 14 MPs and it didn't include their own written claims; it was just the figures. And it had not been Heather Brooke who requested this particular data, but the BBC, which with a couple of national papers had signed up for her crusade. But it was the first crack in the dam.

Back in the hall, she went to the rostrum as a delegate from the NUJ's London Freelance Branch to propose a motion. Couched in the unionese language in which such things are written, it began: "This ADM welcomes the U-turn by the British Government over its plans to introduce new charging proposals which would have watered down the Freedom of Information Act. ADM instructs the NEC to campaign to



Heather Brooke: lone freelance

extend the scope and range of the Act ..."

This was another flank of the freedom of information war - fighting off a particularly underhand move by the UK Government to stifle the number of FoI applications by limiting the cost that could be incurred by public bodies in answering them. That battle had been won the year before. But it was only a skirmish and the biggest one was still raging on.

Heather Brooke was a former small-town newspaper reporter who had become exasperated with the increasing corporate control of American journalism, given it up and come to England in 1997 to do a master's degree in English literature. She thought she was through with journalism, and came back to it only in a roundabout way.

Continued on page two

News



From page one

She and her husband were living in a former council flat in east London, on an estate that was plagued with youth crime. She wanted to find out what the council was doing about it. "I found that the attitude of the council was incredibly feudal," she says. "They would not give me any information. Councils work for the public and the public should have access to it. They shove propaganda at you but the minute you ask a question they clam up.

"It's the same everywhere in this country, they don't want to give you any information that could challenge their authority. In the US I was trained to do journalism in a way that was heavily reliant on public records. I came to Britain and there are no public records to speak of. Your journalism is based on who you know, not what you know, and I didn't know anybody. I tried to do journalism as in the US and found there were no records, which made me angry.

"That's what got me into writing a book on freedom of information." *Your Right To Know*, published in 2004, is widely used by journalists as a handbook. The same year Heather Brooke came to the NUJ with an offer to hold training courses into the use of the UK Freedom of Information Act (FoI), which was to come into force on January 1 2005.

The offer was quickly taken up. The union, which had campaigned for FoI for years, had been worried that when the Act came in there would be too few

Expenses habit: Hazel Blears was one of the first MPs whose claims made the news

journalists with the initiative to take advantage of it. The culture of journalism, it was felt, might have moved too far under commercial pressures from investigative reporting towards cheap, ready-made, officially-provided or personality-based news.

The courses have been a great success and are still going. Journalists who have taken it have won awards for bringing all kinds of questionable activities to light and have gathered notable scalps, such as David Gordon of the *Belfast Telegraph* whose enquiries into the business connections of Ian Paisley Junior led to his resignation as a Northern Ireland minister.

The union need not have worried. Despite the limitations in the categories of information that can be accessed, despite the patchy responses of public authorities and despite the delays in the appeals process that can drag cases on for years, FoI has been a thumping success for British journalism.

In the process of researching the book Heather Brooke approached the authorities at the House of Commons to find out what steps they had taken to prepare for FoI. "They hadn't done anything," she says, "so when the Act came in I started making requests. I made one on MPs' expenses, one on their staff, then their travel, and then the second homes allowances.

"The Commons said they couldn't do it so I appealed to the information commissioner. He said I should narrow it down. I asked the Commons how many they could manage and they said 'ten'. I thought it was ridiculous but that's all I could get so I picked ten top politicians - party leaders, ministers and so on. The Commons refused to comply so I appealed again to the commissioner."

This was in 2006. By now journalists on the *Sunday Times*, *Sunday Telegraph* and the BBC had made requests, over particular MPs they were interested in. "I emailed the others suggesting we should appeal together to the Information Tribunal," says Heather Brooke, "so it would show we were all in it for the public interest, not for our own scoops." This brought Ben Leapman of the *Sunday Telegraph* and Jonathan Ungood-Thomas of the *Sunday Times* into the action, and the number of MPs they were pursuing to

'It's the same story everywhere in this country - they don't want to give you any information that could challenge their authority'

14: Heather Brooke's ten and one each for the others.

It took the commissioner more than a year to rule that, yes, MPs' claims for allowances should be released, but not their documentation. The BBC accepted the ruling and the Commons supplied that limited information; this is what Heather Brooke downloaded at the NUJ conference. The others decided to go for broke and appealed to the Information Tribunal, where in February 2008 they won the day.

The Commons not going to give in without a fight. "They have been relentlessly obstructive throughout the proceedings," says Heather Brooke. Speaker Michael Martin was advised that he wouldn't win an appeal to the High Court so he hired a new legal team; they appealed, and lost. Then they applied to get the judgement stayed. The judge ordered them to provide the full information.

Having won at the High Court over the 14 cases Heather Brooke said: right, now I want the others. "The Commons knew they would get a deluge of requests so they said they would publish them all in October [2008]."

Nothing appeared. "They said they would publish them in December. Again nothing appeared. In January they said, 'it's too complicated, we can't do it.' I had a suspicion they hadn't done anything at all, so I put in an FoI request for the contract they had put out to scan the documents, and the answer came back that it had in fact all been done."

That data is what was on the hard drive acquired by the *Telegraph*, and the delay was to give MPs the chance to delete - "redact" in the terminology - anything they wanted to. This censored version is what the Commons eventually released in June. The difference between them is what the battle was about, and the public could see it, clear as daylight, when the *Telegraph* was able to compare them. Heather Brooke has been vindicated by events.

"What I didn't expect was the public outrage," she says. "I find that the most heartening thing of the whole story. This has been a wake-up call to journalists as well as politicians, because they can see that the public are interested in this kind of old-fashioned story. And it does sell newspapers.

"Editors always used to tell me, 'people don't care about politics or MPs'. They couldn't work out why I was so interested in them. But I have always had the philosophy that people are distanced from politics because they don't have any real information about their MPs. I have always believed that if they did they would be incredibly interested, and I have been proved right, which is always good."

So is she a bit smug now? "Oh God yes, mega smug."

News

Calls for Iran to stop harrasing media

Index on Censorship is calling for the release of a renowned Canadian-Iranian journalist and film maker.

On Sunday 21 June, the Canadian-Iranian journalist and filmmaker Maziar Bahari was arrested in Tehran. He is currently being detained and has not been charged. He is one of 24 journalists and bloggers now being held, according to Reporters without Borders, and it has become virtually impossible for the media to cover events in Iran.

Maziar, 41, is one of the most talented journalists of his generation – a writer, playwright, editor and documentary-maker, as well as a news correspondent. He is also one of the bravest. He has consistently made films in Iraq since 2003, at great risk to his own safety, and his documentaries and writing add up to one of the most varied portraits of Iran over the past decade.

His work includes a remarkable film about an Iranian serial killer *And Along Came A Spider* and, most recently, *An Iranian Odyssey* about the plot to overthrow Mossadegh in 1953. More than any other journalist working today, Bahari's work gives a profound insight into the life and history of the country, partly because he is a creative writer as well as a reporter.

His book *Transit Tehran*, an anthology of writing by young Iranians edited with Malu Halasa, offers an



State violence: street scene in Tehran

immensely rich portrait of modern life that defies categorisation. He has also contributed to *Index on Censorship*.

His detention marks a new low point for freedom of speech in Iran. He is the kind of journalist that Iran needs – to report on events, to analyse trends and to give the rare view of Iranian society that his work so consistently provides.

Index has called on the Iranian government to release Bahari and all journalists who are currently detained. www.indexoncensorship.org/2009/06/iran-maziar-bahari

● The International Federation of Journalists has called on the Iranian authorities to guarantee the safety and freedom of all journalists attempting to cover events in Iran following reports of journalists being arrested and union leaders going into hiding in late June.

"The Iranian authorities must immediately release all imprisoned journalists and send a clear signal that journalists are to be allowed to work freely and without fear of arrest or intimidation," said Aidan White, IFJ general secretary.

"We are particularly concerned about the fate of Ali Mazrooei, chair of the Association of Iranian Journalists."

According to reports, Mazrooei and other leaders of the Association, an affiliate of the IFJ, went into hiding following a wave arrests of journalists and demonstrators over the third weekend of June.

Newsweek correspondent Maziar Bahari was also arrested (see above) and John Leyne, BBC Tehran correspondent, was asked to leave the country.

Further reports suggest that up to ten Iranian journalists have been arrested and many others have gone into hiding.

Several foreign journalists such as Mikel Ayestarán from Spanish daily ABC have left the country after the refusal of the authorities to extend their temporary visas.

These developments follow widespread restrictions on foreign media in Iran and the closing of many websites by the authorities.

Victory for protection of sources in Belfast

The National Union of Journalists and the International Federation of Journalists have hailed the decision of a Northern Ireland court not to order journalist Suzanne Breen to hand over notes to the police "as a landmark victory for journalism and for civil liberties."

At Belfast records court on 18 June, Judge Thomas Burgess refused an application which would have forced Suzanne, Northern editor of the *Sunday Tribune*, to hand over notes, computer equipment and other material following publication of stories on the Real IRA.

Irish NUJ Secretary, Séamus Dooley, was present in court along with NUJ colleagues to support Ms Breen. He said: "The NUJ welcomes this landmark judgment. No journalist should face the prospect of a prison sentence for doing their job in the public interest.

"Judge Burgess has recognised the central importance of the protection of journalistic sources and also accepted that a

journalist who hands over confidential material could put their life at risk." The outcome of the case was "a landmark victory for journalism and civil liberties".

In a ruling which took more than 30 minutes to read out, Judge Burgess said requiring Ms Breen to hand over notes and other material would be a breach of her right to life under the European Convention.

The decision was also welcomed by the International Federation of Journalists: "This is a historic victory in the journalists' fight for the protection of sources," said Aidan White, IFJ general secretary. "It is a milestone achievement for Suzanne and the National Union of Journalists in Great Britain and Ireland who have supported her throughout the process."

Writing on the *Index on Censorship* Free Speech blog, Henry McDonald pointed out that "at least three correspondents have been subjected to the attempts by

Bloody Sunday inquiry and the Billy Wright inquiry to get them to hand over confidential material. When they refused, the legal teams acting for the inquiries have gone to court to force the journalists' hand. At best, the reporters reluctant to reveal sources and confidential material to the inquiries face contempt of court charges.

"The outcome of the Breen case may have implications for them as well. And in addition for Ian Paisley Junior, the son of the Rev Ian Paisley, who is facing sanctions over his determination to protect sources. Paisley Junior will not disclose who leaked him details about the security regime inside the Maze prison at the time when Billy Wright, a loyalist killer, was murdered in the H-Blocks in December 1997."

Paisley goes to court to find if his refusal to hand over sources and information will either land him in jail or result in him paying a heavy fine.

VISION GONE

The long-awaited *Digital Britain* report on the future of UK media and telecommunications policy is a damp squib, says **Granville Williams**

Sometimes the spin is just too much. On the day the policy proposals in *Digital Britain* were published, Gordon Brown had a piece in the *Times*, "The internet is as vital as water and gas". I could spend the whole of this article discussing the gap between the rhetoric in his article and the reality of the proposals in *Digital Britain*. But let's just take one example: "I am determined that Britain's digital infrastructure will be first class," the prime minister proclaimed. On the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) website he also says: "This report shows how we will ensure we have a world-class digital and communications infrastructure."

In fact, the Government aims to provide universal access to a minimum data rate of 2Mb per second by 2012 – not a very ambitious target, considering it can already be delivered to 90 per cent of the population. What we will have in large areas of the country is the present operators delivering slower broadband speeds through existing cable and aluminium cables, with mobile broadband filling the gaps.

And its ambition pales even further when we look at international comparisons. Australia, for instance, has announced a £21bn plan to provide

fibre networks directly to 90 per cent of homes and businesses in the country over the next eight years, at an average cost of around £2,700 per home passed. The other 10 per cent of houses, in rural areas, will be served by wireless technology. The eight-year project is a joint venture with industry but the government retains majority ownership of the investment body.

In South Korea there are proposals for converged communications networks offering speeds of up to 1Gbps, which is 500 times faster than what will be available for much of Britain.

There is a complete lack of vision about developing the next generation broadband access in the UK, with very little discussion about the benefits of a fully fibre-optic network in the report. The core philosophy at the heart of *Digital Britain* is that broadband access will be delivered through a *laissez-faire* market-led regulatory regime, whereas what we need are inter-

ventionist policies to develop a modern digital fibre-optic infrastructure. The report states that the UK "will achieve wide-scale next generation coverage first through market-led investment, and to a smaller degree, through targeted intervention."

The cost of connecting every home in the country directly to a fibre-optic network has been estimated at £25bn. In comparison, the British Government has injected tens of billions of pounds into the banking system in recent months to very little tangible benefit.

The overall thrust of *Digital Britain* is about the digital economy and business. The cover's report has the logos of both the BIS and Department of Culture, Media and Sport on it but it is



very clear that in the tensions between commercial interests and the social and cultural priorities which the report had to consider (local and regional news, public service programmes and broadband access for those currently excluded) the solutions proposed place no burdens on the commercial players in the burgeoning digital markets – the ISPs and cable, satellite and telecommunications companies who will all benefit from the expansion of broadband. Rather it is the public who, directly or indirectly, will pick up the tab.

Carter report

The corporate values and market ideology at the centre of the report are highlighted by the proposals to use the BBC's £130m digital switchover funding and "top slicing" money from the licence fee in the future, and the £6-a-year tax on fixed-line networks to fund vital public policy concerns. Telecom company shares rose sharply after the plans to subsidise the deployment of broadband networks were revealed. As one investment analyst commented: "The creation of a next generation fund to subsidise a UK fibre buildout...is a long term positive for BT".

There is another way. Two unions, BECTU and the NUJ, commissioned the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) to look at different ways to raise funds, apart from "top slicing" the BBC Licence fee, to ensure public service programming is available on other channels apart from the BBC's.

The IPPR proposal is a one per cent levy on hefty mobile phone profits and on the excess profits of broadcasters with no obligation to provide any public service content, such as Sky and Virgin. This money would provide the wherewithal to pay for public service programmes (children, arts, science, documentary, local news) on Channel 4 or any other broadcaster who wanted to bid for it.

There is one consolation in all of this, although it was announced separately from the *Digital Britain* report. In January 2009 the Local Media Alliance (LMA), which comprises the UK's seven top regional newspapers groups controlling 72 per cent of the UK market, banded together to lobby the Government. At a meeting with Lord Carter on February 2 the LMA argued that financial circumstances affecting the industry required the relaxation of local media merger restrictions. As a result the Office of Fair Trading (OFT) set up a Local Media Review to which the CPBF contributed evidence. Its report, timed to coincide with *Digital Britain*, concluded that reform of rules governing mergers in local media was unnecessary.

The fate of the policy proposals in *Digital Britain* is uncertain but it is deeply depressing that this Government has endorsed Carter's proposal to undermine the distinct role of the BBC licence fee. What is also worrying is that it was not just the usual suspects (Rupert Murdoch's the *Times*, *Daily Telegraph*) attacking the BBC "behemoth" but papers like the *Independent* which in a leader argued "diverting some of the licence fee revenue to non-BBC broadcasters, including Channel 4, makes sense". It will be an appalling unintended consequence if the report's expressed desire to protect public service content leads to the weakening of the one organisation which has unfailingly delivered it.

The death of broadcasting

The *Digital Britain* report sees public service merely as an optional add-on in a free market, says **Patricia Holland**

Back in the 1980s, the free-marketeering Peacock Committee was set up by Margaret Thatcher with the explicit aim of undermining the BBC's public service status. The Committee looked forward to a day when technology would bring about a "true market" in broadcasting with only commercial players. As the second decade of the 21st century approaches, the digitisation of Britain means that those Thatcherite dreams could now become a reality. What is more, broadcasting itself is coming to an end.

Although television's "digital switchover" programme, due to be completed in 2012, is central to the communications environment envisaged by the *Digital Britain* report, the document is not concerned with the long-term future of television. Broadcasting as we know it is out of the picture. Instead the focus is on "content", which will come "from multiple providers on multiple platforms". Against this background, public service appears no more than an optional add-on.

In Peacock's day, only four television channels were available. The broadcasters commissioned the programmes, controlled the schedules and arranged their output to suit the rhythms of the day. The BBC had its licence fee and Channel 4 was funded by a levy on the ITV companies, so advertisers could not pick and choose their platforms.

This meant that the elbowing and jostling of a market free-for-all amongst production companies, entrepreneurs and media magnates interested only in maximising revenue, was not, at that time, feasible. But in Stephen Carter's vision of the fast approaching *Digital Britain*, such a scenario is not only possible, but highly likely.

Following a vigorous campaign, the 2003 Communications Act included the duty of broadcasters to serve "citizens" as well as "consumers", which means that, as long as broadcasters, in the traditional sense, hang around, the

concept of public service cannot be completely ignored. The *Digital Britain* report contains a chapter headed "Public Service Content" which recognises that a market free-for-all needs to be moderated by "public intervention" if "public interests" are to be served.

Like previous reports, *Digital Britain* insists the BBC is at the centre of public service provision. But, despite lip-service, the BBC's right to its unique funding from a tax on viewers comes under question. The suggestion is that the BBC's licence fee should be shared, to provide competition for itself. This, of course, is the logic of an approach where the focus is no longer on broadcasting as a public service, but merely on narrowly identified "public service content".

Previous reports have argued strongly for plurality of provision. It is of democratic importance that there is a powerful organisation to provide competition for the BBC, as ITV has done since the 1950s. It is accepted that ITV is no longer relevant. As far as *Digital Britain* is concerned, the only issue is "the scale and pace" at which it "moves from public service to wholly commercial operations".

Channel 4, which, in Ofcom's review earlier this year had been seen as the centre of a "new entity" which could balance the BBC, is now simply encouraged to "explore joint ventures" as none of the suggested funding options to support it in the new environment appeared to be viable. And, the report adds "C4's current remit is now too television-centric for the role a recast and revitalised C4C should play in Britain's digital media". Once more, this is within the logic of disappearing broadcasters.

For the authors of *Digital Britain* "It is now clear that the analysis and prescriptions are more likely to be effective if they start from the premise that the structure and the set of entities which have been collectively known as 'Public Service Broadcasting' are over." It's a depressing conclusion.

Beating broadcasters at their own game

Newspaper websites have broken new ground in challenging radio and television, writes **Nicholas Jones**

Almost lost amid the United Kingdom's minimal news coverage of the election campaign for the European Parliament and the English county councils were some significant developments within the British media landscape. Newspaper websites broke new ground in their bid to challenge other news outlets and showed they could compete head-on with mainstream television and radio services.

On the morning of polling day a three-hour live discussion with politicians was broadcast by Suntalk, the online radio station of the *Sun*, demonstrating in an audio-visual format the freedom of the press to ignore the long-standing ban on partisan political broadcasting while voting takes place.

Suntalk's presenter Jon Gaunt insisted he had become "a most unbiased broadcaster" but his interviews and commentary were interspersed with repeated reminders to his listeners of the editorial in that day's edition of the *Sun* which recommended readers to vote Conservative as "the only way" to get Britain to hold a referendum on the Lisbon Treaty.

On most days of the campaign there was little, if any, direct reporting of European issues but the unprecedented level of news coverage about the ongoing scandal over the expense claims of MPs at Westminster provided further evidence of a continued acceleration in the 24-hour news cycle.

The most profound shift was in the ability of newspapers to use their websites to direct the news agenda by offering an online introduction to next morning's exclusive stories. Although the information was followed up instantly by other news outlets, the newspapers concerned still believed they could claim "ownership" of their exclusives.

During the four weeks when the *Daily Telegraph* published day after day fresh disclosures about extravagant and poten-

tially fraudulent claims for parliamentary expenses and allowances, the paper's website regularly beat the rolling news channels at their own game.

At around 9pm each evening the *Daily Telegraph's* website carried a taster for next morning's exclusive story, revealing details about yet another group of ministers and MPs caught up in a scandal that triggered the resignation of the speaker of the House of Commons and threatened to unseat the prime minister.

So eager were BBC News and Sky News to keep viewers up to date with the latest developments that their journalists quoted live from the *Daily Telegraph's* website. As the broadcasters scrambled to keep up, the front page of www.telegraph.co.uk was often shown live on-screen for several minutes in order to illustrate the reporter's commentary.

By trailing its latest disclosures each evening in advance of the paper's publication next morning, the *Daily Telegraph* was giving a text book demonstration of the conviction of its editor Will Lewis that the only way the press can compete with television and radio is by going online and by stamping their authority on their latest story line.

Not only did the release of a summary of next morning's revelations help push up sales by whetting the appetite of potential readers but it also secured almost limitless free advertising for the *Telegraph* brand and would have repaid many times over the rumoured £100,000 outlay for a leaked copy of the disc containing four years' worth of MPs' expenses claims and receipts.

So great was the public's disgust over the abuse of taxpayers' money that by the final week of the election campaign the loss of faith in the Government's ability to deal with the crisis began to fuel speculation about a challenge to Gordon Brown's leadership of the Labour Party.

When, on the eve of polling day, the *Guardian* published a damning editorial declaring that the prime minister had no vision and no plan and that it was "time to cut him loose", the paper drove the story forward by revealing on its website that rebel Labour MPs were being encouraged to sign an email calling on Brown to step down.

Events moved quickly that morning: at 10.30am the Communities Secretary Hazel Blears resigned and at noon www.guardian.co.uk revealed details of what was dubbed the "Hotmail plot"

against the Prime Minister urging dissident Labour MPs to email their support for a change in the leadership. Yet again a newspaper's exclusive online output helped to shape the day's news coverage.

In the absence of any serious debate about European issues, the media focused its attention on the degree to which anger with the mainstream parties might generate a protest vote that would help UKIP and the BNP, two of the smaller parties committed to British withdrawal from the European Union.

Callers to Suntalk's election-day programme included several listeners who told Jon Gaunt they had cast a protest vote that morning against the established parties in the elections for both the European Parliament and the English county councils. Some said they had voted for UKIP because it was the only party which would get Britain out of Europe and stop the EU "wasting our money".

Gaunt did all he could to encourage listeners to explain how they had voted because he said Suntalk was the only channel on the airwaves where politics was being discussed while the polling stations were open. "We are a newspaper of the air. The only place in Britain where you can talk politics today is Suntalk."

George Pascoe-Watson, the *Sun's* political editor was the first on air guest and he claimed that if Labour finished fourth in the Euro elections it would be "curtains" for Brown. "The *Sun* has been urging people to vote Conservative because the Conservatives are offering a referendum on the Lisbon Treaty and no one else is".

Nigel Farage, the UKIP leader, and the Conservatives' shadow Europe minister, Mark Francoise, were both interviewed on the programme, underlining Suntalk's boast that it did not have to pay heed to the long standing convention that radio and television should be politics free while polling stations remain open. Farage was clearly delighted to have been afforded the opportunity and he congratulated Suntalk on making political history by broadcasting a live political debate as people were voting.

While it might be suggested that Suntalk probably had a minimal impact on voting intentions, not least because it was up against stiff competition for the morning phone-in audience, the *Sun* did

News and events

establish an important precedent and showed that a politicised newspaper could reinvent itself as an online radio station and freely debate politics on polling day.

Although the Conservatives have not gone as far as endorsing Rupert Murdoch's demand that the rules on political impartiality should be scrapped altogether, the party's latest policy document on public service broadcasting does recommend that newspaper websites which offer online radio and television services should be free to pursue the editorial lines of their choice once they become digital channels.

The significance of Suntalk's recommendation that listeners should vote Conservative was that it was a further illustration of the political realignment of the Murdoch press which had previously backed Labour in the 2005 general election.

During the build-up to polling day the *Sun* urged readers to sign a petition in support of the Conservatives' demand for an immediate general election and subsequent editorials recommended voting Conservative in order to secure a referendum on the Lisbon treaty.

Likewise the *Times* urged its readers to vote Conservative as it was the only party that had promised the British people a referendum and would seek to withdraw from the "pointless internal deliberation designed to cement power centrally" within the EU.

Newspaper websites continued to influence news coverage in the aftermath of Gordon Brown's humiliation in the European elections, when Labour finished third behind UKIP on a 15.7 per cent share of the vote.

In an attempt to answer criticism of the way she had damaged Labour's prospects by resigning on polling day, Hazel Blears chose to issue her apology via an interview on the website of her local evening newspaper, the *Manchester Evening News*. Audio and video footage from the *MEN* site led radio and television news bulletins, demonstrating yet again the pulling power of newspapers in delivering agenda-setting stories.

CPBF convergence conference

By Granville Williams

The CPBF is holding a major international conference in London in October to discuss the challenges facing the media.

"Media for All? The Challenge of Convergence" takes place on Friday 30 and Saturday 31 October at the School of Pharmacy in Brunswick Square.

In November 2006, the CPBF discussed a research project, "Media Ownership in the Age of Convergence".

We launched this project to research the changing patterns of ownership in our rapidly converging media, and develop new policy proposals. We also wanted to influence debates on media policy in the run-up to the next general election

The contours of the political and economic world have changed dramatically since late 2006, as the consequences of lax regulation in the financial and banking sectors have triggered the worst financial crisis since the Great Depression and rapidly increasing unemployment.

The impact of the economic crisis on the media has been exacerbated by the migration of advertising revenue away from traditional print and broadcast media to new media platforms, notably the internet. On 4 March 2009 ITV announced a £2.73bn pre-tax loss and cost-cutting measures including the loss of 600 jobs and the closure of Yorkshire Television's studios in Leeds. For the local and regional press the results have been severe in terms of job losses, decline in circulation and advertising revenues, and the closure of newspapers.

A recent estimate from the National Union of Journalists reported that during the last twelve months some 50 titles had been closed (many of them "freesheets") and 2,000 journalist jobs

in the regional and local media had gone. The union has an interactive map on its website identifying the scale of redundancies and has published its own economic stimulus plan for local media.

Just what sort of local and regional media will be left and the impact on the local democratic processes is of great concern to the CPBF, and that's why there will be sessions at the "Media for All?" conference to discuss these issues.

But the problems facing the media are not limited to the UK. In January, French President Sarkozy announced a package of measures costing €600m (£565m) to support the ailing French press and in the USA the closure of the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* highlighted the extent of the threat to US newspapers. That's why we are pleased that John Nicholls, a journalist with *The Nation* and one of the founders of the US Free Press Media Reform movement, will be a keynote speaker giving his assessment of the US situation.

The conference, with three plenary and two breakout sessions, will tackle other big themes, including Politics and Online Media and Digital Futures.

We are working very hard to ensure the conference will have a range of expert speakers and give people an overview of the kind of policies which we need to campaign on to protect high-quality, diverse media.

And as an added bonus on the Friday evening, at the same venue, we are showing Ken Loach's film *Which Side Are You On?* with Lee Hall (*Billy Elliot* and *The Pitmen Painters*) and Tony Benn among the speakers. We will look at the lessons of the miners' strike for today, focusing on politics, culture and the media. Put the dates in your diary and book up for both events now.

You can book your place at the conference either through the CPBF website or the CPBF National Office.

THE MINERS' STRIKE AND POLITICS TODAY

Pre-conference debate

Tony Benn, Lee Hall and Ken Loach's *Which Side Are You On?*

7pm Friday 30 October

£5 book online, post or pay at the door

CAMPAIGN FOR PRESS AND BROADCASTING FREEDOM

MEDIA FOR ALL? THE CHALLENGE OF CONVERGENCE

International conference on the challenge of achieving a high quality, diverse and democratic media with John Nichols, Ray Fitzwalter, Natalie Fenton, Nick Jones, Tony Lennon, Andrew Currach, Bob Franklin, Alison Harcourt, Christine Payne, Jeremy Dear and many more...

SATURDAY 31 OCTOBER 2009
SCHOOL OF PHARMACY
29-39 BRUNSWICK SQUARE, LONDON WC1N 1AX

Registration and networking from 9am. Conference 10am - 5pm

Corporations £150, Not-for-profit and Trade Union organisations £25, Individuals £20, Concessions: students, unwaged, retired £10. 25 per cent discount for bookings before 15th September

Book online at: <http://www.cpbf.org.uk/mediaforall> or by post: CPBF, 23 Orford Road, London E17 9NL 0208 521 5932

News

Murdoch forces Dawson out of distribution

By Ivan Beavis

By 2010 Dawson News will have lost newspaper and magazine distribution contracts worth £500m. A duopoly will be created in the UK with John Menzies exclusively distributing newspapers and magazines in Scotland and the north and Smith News doing the same in the south.

The distribution industry has been dominated by three big wholesalers. However, the way that publishers – led by News International – have awarded contracts has effectively forced Dawson News out of the market.

There are strong grounds for believing that a predatory pricing policy together with a boycott of Dawson by publishers is at the root of this – and you might think this would be ideal fare for investigation by the Competition Commission. But the Office of Fair Trading has been vacillating about such a referral for years.

The loss of 2,000 jobs in this sector (the likely effect of Dawson's closure) is bad enough in an industry decimated since Wapping. But the potential effect of such market domination on the means of distribution and exchange on free speech should also set warning bells ringing for all CPBF supporters. Watch this space.



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– from the review of *Shafted* by veteran *Daily Mirror* Industrial Correspondent, Geoffrey Goodman, in *Tribune*, 8 May 2009

You can buy *Shafted* (£9.99 + £2.50 P&P) online at www.cpbf.org.uk/shafted or from the National Office with cheques made payable to "CPBF". If you would like to organise a meeting and invite us to speak about the book contact the CPBF National Office.

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

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