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## inside . . . TRADE UNIONS AND THE MEDIA

- The media and the miners
- Dead seagulls command more coverage than dead seafarers; media misses the bus
- Labour and the media
- Politics, media and public disbelief
- The media and Labour in the US

# LOST IN THE MARGINS Labour and the Media

In this special issue of Free Press we look behind the headlines and examine Press coverage of trade unions

by Granville Williams

OVER 20 million people work in Britain – 10.7 million men, 10.1 million women according to April 1993 figures. It's not the whole picture, of course, because almost half the women (4.6 million) are working in low paid, part-time jobs. All these people are likely to spend a third of their lives in factories, shops or offices assembling and manufacturing goods, serving people or blinking at computers.

Add to that number the people who want to work but can't – in April 1993 around three million according to the heavily massaged government figures, and over 4 million calculated on the old basis. And in spite of six statutes passed by the Conservatives attacking trade union rights since they came to power 7.7 million trades unionists remain affiliated to the TUC (excluding the 300,000 electricians who will come back to TUC membership at the 1993 Congress).

Statistics only give an impersonal indication of the central and pervasive importance of work, or its absence, in people's lives. Topics such as training, health and safety, stress, equal rights, union rights, or fundamental changes which are producing a growing number of low paid, decasualised workers would all provide a ready supply a dramatic, newsworthy, human interest stories to the media.

Or so you would think. But the clear conclusion of even the most cursory study of our media shows how marginal these themes are in our newspapers, and on our TV news and current affairs programmes. Indeed when industrial news hits the headlines it's often presented in cliché, confrontational terms ('Unions geared for a summer of discontent') rather than explaining the issues behind industrial action. Articles comparing industrial performance often focus on superficial comparisons between British workers and their Japanese or German counterparts (more productive,



loyal, reliable, and so on).

This special issue of *Free Press* attempts to get behind the headlines, identify the reasons for this state of affairs and highlight the concerns which the CPBF have had about this theme since our inception.

One vivid insight into the silence of the media on trade union issues appeared in Hugo Young's column, "Shameful saga shows up a politically sick society," *The Guardian*, 27 May, 1993 where he described the cynical process by which the government amended the Trade Union Reform and Employment Rights Bill in the House of Lords on 24 May. This action followed a Court of Appeal judgement on 30 April that it was anti-union discrimination by Associated Newspapers (publishers of the *Daily Mail*) and Associated British Ports to pay people more if they changed from collective bargaining to personal contracts.

Lord Ullswater presented the government case: denying a pay rise to someone who refuses to sign a personal contract

wasn't 'victimising' a union member, simply "permitting the employer to achieve an organisational or strategic purpose," he said. That's high flown jargon for riding rough shod over trade union rights.

Hugo Young pointed out that only Channel Four News covered this amazing change which gives employers the unfettered right to penalise trade union membership; elsewhere silence, invisibility and dumb indifference from the print and broadcast media. Hugo Young's conclusion is worth quoting: "Somehow, neither the removal of basic rights nor the blithe crookery by which politicians are prepared to overturn the courts, any longer thrust their way onto the agenda. They also die who only stand and sleep".

In a sorry postscript to the affair, when the amended Bill returned to the House of Commons only one Conservative MP, Peter Bottomley, a former employment minister, opposed it. The amendment was approved by 297 votes to 275, accompanied by minimal media coverage.

# INFAMOUS, FAMOUS, FORGOTTEN

## The Media and the Miners

As more pits, supposedly reprieved in March, are threatened with closure, Leeds journalist Tony Harcup comments on the media silence over pit closures.

Miners and ex-miners must still be wondering what hit them over the past 12 months. They went from being public enemies to popular heroes before ending up as the invisible men and women. And 17,000 miners have already lost their jobs in the process.

People in the mining communities found it hard to believe - and many found it hard to stomach - the way the media responded to the Government's callous pit closure announcement in October 1992. The same newspapers and pundits who in 1984-5 attacked the miners as the 'enemy within' now fell over themselves to describe them as the salt of the earth, the soul of the nation and so on (cue Hovis music).

Regional and local newspapers circulating in mining areas rallied to the cause, organised their own petitions and handed them in at Downing Street with 'celebrities' such as professional Yorkshireman Michael Parkinson keen to lend their presence for photo-calls. Even the Conservative Yorkshire Post produced car stickers supporting the campaign.

Nationally, tabloid and broadsheet newspapers alike responded to the public mood and articulated the case for coal. And for days after the initial closure announcement it seemed like you couldn't turn on the radio or TV news without hearing mournful brass band music used as a backdrop to interviews with people from mining communities condemning the Government.

The closures appeared to come as a shock to the bulk of the media, yet a massive pit closure programme was the inevitable consequence of the Tory general election victory in April 1992. People in the industry knew it. Industrial correspondents knew it. Readers of some of the broadsheet newspapers may have gleaned it.

Pits have been closing regularly since the return to work in 1985, and the Government wanted to chop the coal industry down to size for the "ultimate privatisation".

The Government's mistake was in formally announcing such a large closure programme, instead of adopting the usual salami tactics of pit by pit closures. The public was outraged and the media responded by



Women against Pit Closure Rally, London, Hyde Park Feb 9, 1993 Photo: Janina Struk

lambasting the Tories for their heartlessness - safe in the knowledge that another general election would be years away.

Demoralised miners responded to the public mood, a massive campaign took off, and the Government was shaken. But it wasn't stirred into changing its intentions - merely into doing what it would have done in the first place if it hadn't succumbed to post-election arrogance. Namely, it delayed and prevaricated until the media got bored with the coal industry. By the start of 1993 pit closures began to feel like old news.

Women's pit camps were set up outside the frontline pits, partly to provide a focus for opposition to the closures and partly in an effort to keep the issue in the news. Women led by Anne Scargill began occupying pit buildings, staging sit-ins, and setting up symbolic camps outside Government buildings in London. Again, initial sympathetic coverage soon faded away.

By the time the pits began closing from this April there was virtual media silence.

There is much talk in the coalfields of a deliberate 'news blackout' on the pits issue. Many miners forced into leaving the industry are bitter that the media's flirtation with the mining communities was so short-lived.

Many argue that if the media had "told the truth" during the 1984-5 strike against pit closures, the battle for coal could have been won then and wouldn't have to be repeated in 1992-3.

The sad thing about the British media is that, on the whole, it doesn't need a formal news 'blackout' to ignore the plight of working class communities. Outside the coalfield areas, everyday 'news values' made the pit closures big news when the

government was on the ropes. But when it emerged that the Tory rebels could not deliver the knock-out blow, those same news values dictated that the continuing miners' campaign had suddenly become irrelevant to the rest of the nation.

Newspapers and broadcasting organisations becoming bored with the miners in 1993 was as useful to the Government as the way the media helped isolate the miners in 1984-85 by focussing almost exclusively on 'picket line violence' and the 'drift back to work'.

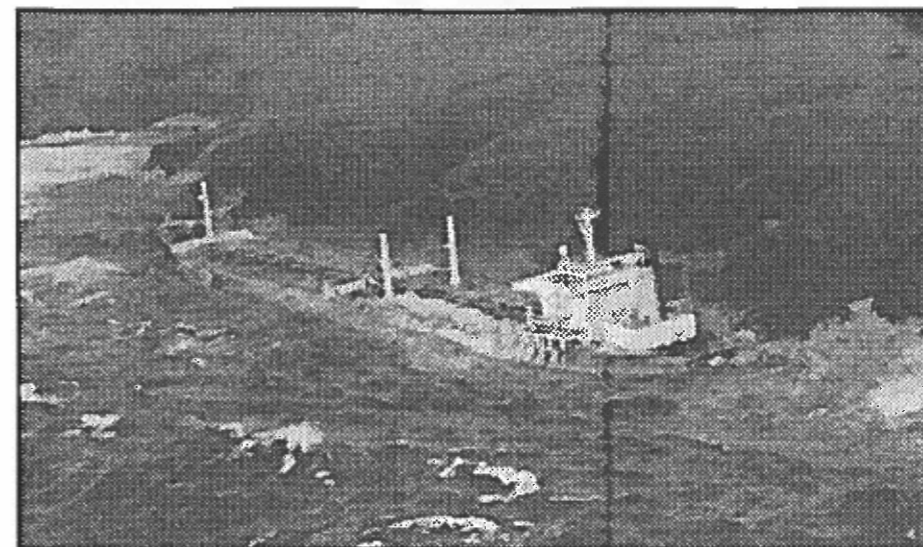
With some honourable exceptions (Seamus Milne of the Guardian, Peter Lazenby of the Yorkshire Evening Post and Nick Wood of BBC North, to name just three) the British media has not emerged from the latest campaign for coal with much credit.

Before the April 1992 general election the media did not discover or articulate that a Tory victory would lead to accelerated pit closures. After the closure announcement the media did not effectively challenge those who claimed to support coal but who voted for the privatisation of the electricity industry which did so much to damage the market for coal.

Pundits and leader writers who in 1984 condemned the NUM for not holding a strike ballot, in 1993 condemned the NUM for holding one.

And, perhaps most damaging of all, the media failed to stay the course. It allowed the Government to get itself off the hook by playing a long game, leaving the mining communities to die in silence, apparently forgotten by the rest of the country.

Memories may be short in newsrooms and editors' offices. But they are very long down the pit and in the mining communities.



Braer Disaster: NUMAST warned of dangers four years before Photo: John Paul

## DEAD SEAGULLS COMMAND MORE COVERAGE THAN DEAD SEAFARERS

by Andrew Linington NUMAST

WHEN was the last time you read or heard something about shipping? Was it, by any chance, something to do with a disaster? Every union can probably recount their own complaints about the paucity of coverage given to the issues which affect their members. NUMAST has more than its fair share. Four years before the Braer disaster, NUMAST - which represents 18,500 ship masters, officers and cadets - published a detailed report warning that, as a result of disastrous government policies, a major oil spill was inevitable. It attracted a few column inches in the qualities, a spot on the BBC TV news and a few articles in the specialist marine and environmental press.

Yet for weeks after the Braer disaster, journalists were falling over themselves to highlight the issues we had raised in 1989. And our members' cynicism about the reporting of their industry deepened in June when a disaster in which nine seafarers died rapidly evaporated from the schedules. As one member remarked, dead seagulls command more column inches than dead seafarers.

Serious coverage of trade union issues has fallen into sharp decline over the past decade. An apparent growth in the pack mentality and reduced resources for labour desks has seriously curtailed the depth in which workplace issues are reported.

In an increasingly diverse and complex society, unions still retain immense power to inform and educate. Their journals remain the best way to communicate facts and arguments which are rarely treated seriously or with anything but superficiality elsewhere. As a journal editor, I see my task as one of making those issues and arguments as readable, relevant and as meaningful as possible.

NUMAST faces intense communication problems. Members work worldwide in small, mobile units. The catastrophic run-down of the UK merchant fleet has forced more than half our membership into foreign registered ships, with employment through agencies and little or no union recognition. Such problems have increased the importance of the Journal's role. It plays a part in helping to retain a sense of unity and identity. To get the balance right requires a fair degree of editorial autonomy from the union leadership: clumsy, centrist propaganda is a real turn off for readers. Conversely, however, a union journal needs a sense of direction.

We conducted a survey of members to find the issues they wanted to read about. The findings shaped a re-design in format and content. The survey enabled us to focus on members' interests: health and safety; pay and conditions; and general news about their industry, which rarely features in the mass media. The journal also acts as a powerful recruitment tool. More members join by completing the application form in the journal than by any other single source.

Looking to the future, there are mixed signs. The merger mania which has infected the union movement can act to the detriment of the sort of identification process which we aim for as a journal for a small and specialised union. It is hard to create the sense of unity and common purpose in a journal reflecting members drawn from varied industries.

However, technological change may give us new opportunities: desktop publishing, video and electronic communications are already influencing the way we relate.

For a union whose members' jobs take them around the world, the global village is an exciting prospect.

## THE MEDIA MISSES THE BUS

Ken Fuller, District Officer, TGWU

It is, of course, not unusual for trades unions to complain of biased media treatment of industrial disputes and labour issues in general. We had cause for complaint recently as, with some honourable exceptions, the media has tended to accept at face value the assertion by London buses that "between 45 and 50 percent" of services have operated normally during the one-day strikes organised on the issues of wage-cuts, future pension rights and longer hours.

Ironically, the truth was inadvertently reported by the employer's house journal, *LT News*, indicating that there had been a reduction of 5.1 per cent in the mileage operated over a 28-day period in which there had been two one-day strikes. A simple exercise on the calculator demonstrates that over 70 per cent of all LT services were off the road during the strike.

Even more galling is the fact that the media (again, with honourable exceptions) has consistently failed to give adequate coverage to bus issues in London. Despite the fact that buses in the capital carry as many people each day as the Underground and Network Southeast combined, they are for some reason more 'newsworthy'.

This is somewhat strange, given that the Government intends to complete privatisation of London buses by 1994 and to deregulate the capital's bus services by mid-1995.

Yet ask any ten Londoners what bus deregulation means and how many will be able to provide the correct answer?

One in ten - if you're lucky. And even that one will probably have experience of the phenomenon elsewhere in the country, where deregulation was introduced in 1986, leading to a 20 per cent decline in passenger demand - and even worse in the metropolitan areas.

The Government is not going to give Londoners a detailed explanation of what awaits them. That means that the job can only be done by trade unions (the TGWU has distributed 500,000 leaflets on the issue), local campaign groups and the media.

Clearly, however, large sections of the media are failing in their duty to inform the public on this vital issue. One suspects that this is because bus deregulation is viewed - wrongly - as a 'trade union' issue. Why else would LWT's London Programme, for which the issue is a 'natural' be showing no interest whatsoever?

Perhaps the next demonstration on the issue of bus deregulation should be held outside those media offices which have so far failed in their duty.

# LABOURING TO BE HEARD

**QUESTION 1:** Have you ever heard of Terry Palmer or Dave Wilson? Did you know that they won a major legal victory over trade union rights, and that the Government rushed through a change in the law to overturn it in the interest of employers?

**QUESTION 2:** Did you know that during the 1992 General Election campaign an extensive public opinion poll showed that 89 per cent of people opposed government policy on workers' rights to union representation — the biggest popular majority against a government policy ever recorded?

**QUESTION 3:** Did you know that the British Government is being taken to the European Court of Justice by the European Commission itself, for a flagrant breach of a whole series of directives relating to trade unions?

**QUESTION 4:** Did you know that last year one of the first big relief operations to Bosnia — five convoys carrying more than 400 tonnes of aid — was organised by a British trade union?

Editor of the Journalist, Tim Gopsill says the silence is deafening on labour and trade union issues

## ANSWERS

"NO", "NO", "NO" and "NO", most probably. And with good reason. These stories have not hit the headlines — in fact they've hardly been covered at all. The silence of the press on union and labour affairs is one of the most noticeable changes of recent years. Like all media coverage, it is both a symptom and a cause of changed attitudes in society.

There was a time when the nationals used to report union affairs extensively, if not always fairly. The TUC Congress was covered live, in full, on TV. The left/right balance on the General Council, and on the executives of major unions, used to be covered like the selection of national sporting teams.

The Labour or Industrial Correspondents used to hobnob with these General Councillors and General Secretaries and report their every doing.

All the national papers, even the tabloids, had at least two, and sometimes three or four labour correspondents. Their stories were usually pretty predictable, and when they occasionally crop up now — when you come across phrases like "outdated cloth cap image" and "beer and sandwiches at Number Ten" — you have to cringe, but at least it seemed to matter then.

It doesn't seem to now. Only the heavies have one or two labour correspondents, and they often have to fight to get stuff into print. Even loony-lefty or mindless-militant stories don't get news editors excited like they used to.

It's not a matter of being nostalgic. It matters less that the activities of Norman Willis or Bill Morris go unreported than that issues affecting millions of working

(or workless) people are completely missing from the mainstream media agenda.

### Question One

Terry Palmer and Dave Wilson won a verdict in the Court of Appeal on April 30. Their separate cases, taken together, arose from their being deprived of pay rises for refusing to sign personal contracts and give up union bargaining. The court ruled unanimously that it was unlawful for their employers effectively to bribe workers (those who signed contracts and won the rises) to give up union representation.

Within days of the judgement, before it had even been published, the government announced in the House of Lords that it was to amend the Trade Union Reform and Employment Rights Bill to "clarify" the Employment Protection Act, to make such treatment lawful.

By that time the Bill was on its Third Reading in the Lords, the last stage of law-making. It is said to be unprecedented for a government to force through such a change, overturning a ruling by the highest court short of the House of Lords itself, at such a late stage.

But it did. The amendment went through the Lords on May 28 — and this was not reported in any national paper.

When it came back to the Commons, Labour forced a whole day's debate on it — again unprecedented for such an amendment. This six-and-a-half hours of major debate got about the same number of column inches downpage on the politics pages in the next day's broadsheets — the stories angled on the trivial point that one Tory MP, Peter Bottomley, voted against the government, while his wife, the supposedly glamorous Health Secretary Virginia, unsurprisingly voted for it.

That was the Guardian's story, even though it had previously carried a furious

diatribe by columnist Hugo Young, headed "Shameful saga shows up a politically sick society". He pointed out that the government's trickery had gone unreported and concluded: "Somehow, neither the removal of basic rights nor the blithe crookery by which politicians are prepared to overturn the courts, any longer thrust their way onto the agenda."

You can say that again, Hugo. Noone else in the national media will. How can this happen? The Tories are not exactly getting a good press at present and most papers seem to jump at any chance to embarrass them. What is so different about this one? There may be a clue in who the litigants were. Terry Palmer worked for Association British Ports in Southampton docks. And Dave Wilson is a journalist on the Daily Mail.

The owners of our national media are not disinterested publishers; they are big employers. During the 1980s they were in the forefront of the onslaught on trade unionism.

It started with Eddie Shah's Today (the first non-union paper, in 1985), followed up smartly by Murdoch's Wapping adventure of 1986 (sacking 5,000 printers and derecognising all the unions). Then came the carbon copy exercise at TVam in 1987, and the wave of derecognition through most provincial and national newspapers. Commercial radio and TV fell into line with the deregulation imposed by the 1990 Broadcasting Act. The BBC cannot be far behind.

Shah, Murdoch and TVam's Bruce Gyngell were Thatcher's Heroes. They got the laws they needed to prevent industrial action. They were also not stupid. The Tories could see that eliminating union organisation from the media could be a crucial step in the transformation of society they had in mind, and it seems they have



Labour Leader John Smith addresses joint NUJ/GPMU derecognition rally at Reed. Photo: Stefano Cagnoni

had some success. But there has also been some resistance. The media unions (NUJ, GPMU, BECTU) have withstood the ideological, if not the industrial, attack and launched a counter-offensive.

They started Press for Union Rights (PFUR). Even though it is a single-issue campaign, whose demand falls far short of the wholesale repeal of the anti-union laws of the 1980s, it was at first regarded with suspicion by most of the labour movement as a maverick media adventure. But its support has widened since workers in other sectors started suffering the same specific attacks.

### Question Two

PFUR commissioned MORI to do the opinion poll on union rights — a big poll by election standards, with 2,065 people interviewed. Its startling conclusion, with 89 per cent — including 86 per cent of intending Tory voters! — saying that workers should have a statutory right to be represented by their unions, was widely released and received the following national coverage: One paragraph in the Financial Times, one paragraph in the Guardian, a short story in the Morning Star. That was it.

### Question Three

Lobbying activities by PFUR were among the pressures that led to the government being taken to the European Court. That story, splashed in the NUJ paper the Journalist, has yet to be reported in a single national paper. It might appear that this is quite an interesting angle on the whole

Maastricht/Social Chapter controversy; obviously it's not interesting enough.

Coverage of the Social Chapter has almost entirely omitted the real angle — the Tories' determined attempt to render Britain a low-wage third-world style economy, whose primary objective is to attract foreign capital. At the economic level, this is the primary conflict with the policy of the rest of the EC, which is a first-world fortress designed to keep foreign capital out. However, to most editors it is simply a matter of how many Tory MPs are going to vote which way or the other.

But the Commons actually voted for the inclusion of the Chapter in the Maastricht Treaty. Should not this have led to the UK opt-out being cancelled, or to a major constitutional crisis? Should not the press have screamed for a decision of Parliament to be carried out? Not at all; it was allowed to blow over because a few Tories said they didn't really mean it.

Even the media with reputations for fairness are the same. Channel 4 News, most people's idea of a reasonable news programme, came to film Labour leader John Smith speaking at an NUJ/GPMU rally against derecognition. He made by far the strongest statement in support of the right to recognition of any Labour front-bencher in recent years, and afterwards the reporter, who arrived and left with John Smith, was pressed to interview union leaders for their reaction. "Oh no, we're not interested in that," she said. "We're only doing a bit of shooting of John Smith for an item on Labour's relationship with the unions in a few days' time." That of course is the main

union story now. How far can the media push the Labour Party into abandoning its union links? (Quite a long way, judging by Labour's behaviour.)

Of course these are nothing like all the issues of interest to unions and working people that don't get written about. There are thousands. Every union has experiences of unfair or non-existent coverage.

### Question Four

The union was the Engineers and Managers Association, which put together the massive aid operation and whose General Secretary Tony Cooper drove the lead Land Rover as the first convoy left London, with Norman Willis waving goodbye.

Big employers had contributed to the effort. The power companies and British Coal gave money and arranged a photocall with a miner loading coal onto a relief vehicle.

The event was totally ignored by national news media. Just imagine if it had been Richard Branson!

Working people and their unions may never expect decent treatment from the commercial media. But the way their owners suppress their own workers and unions has become so blatant that the reasons for distorted coverage are clearer than ever.

Journalists, who always had difficulties with some of the work they had to do, have in most places lost their collective voice. Their individual conscience, expressed in the NUJ Code of Conduct, has given way to the employers', and, whatever you think of journalists, that is worse.



# POLITICS, MEDIA AND PUBLIC DISBELIEF

By Greg Philo, Glasgow University Media Group

THE MOST important battle ground of political ideas in the 1980s was the economy. It is a crucial area since it underpins most political issues. Voters may express concern about child benefits, pensions or health. But they also know that these have to be paid for and that economic collapse necessarily undercuts social welfare. The Labour MP Harriet Harman acknowledged this after the last election when she noted that the Labour Party's "general credibility problems over the economy may have led some women to disregard promises to increase pensions and child benefit". (*Guardian* 16.7.92)

By the end of the 1980s, financial and city news had become central areas of media reporting, especially on television. This was one consequence of the dominance of the Conservatives and their promotion of the merits of share ownership, entrepreneurs and business dealing in general.

Consequently movements in the City were routinely reported and 'experts' from merchant banks and finance houses were consulted for their apparently neutral opinions on the latest trade or financial news. This gave them an important status as 'impartial commentators'. 'Good news' for them and for television was a healthy stock market and shares rising.

In electoral reporting, the preferences of the City were made absolutely clear by referring to such share movements. On ITN, when Labour took the lead in opinion polls the City sounded near to collapse:

**Newscaster:** *Billions of pounds were wiped off the value of shares this morning, as the City, which traditionally prefers Conservative governments, took fright at the clear Labour lead in opinion polls.*

**Industrial Correspondent:** *It was headlines like these (refers to headline in The Times) showing Labour pulling into the lead which helped to turn City dealing room screens red. At the start of trading this morning billions of pounds were wiped off shares...* (ITN 12.30 1.4.92)

The BBC told a similar story, reporting that "In the City worries about a Labour victory pushed share values down sharply..." (BBC, 18.00, 1.4.92)

Such coverage has a long history. Before the 1987 election, the 'good news' for the City was the Conservatives taking the lead:

*"The Tory lead in the polls may be wafer thin but it's good enough for the*



Cartoon by Colin Wheeler from 'Really Bad News' 1982

*City where dealers and investors are in confident mood. Share prices are going up and up...." (BBC2 22.25 6.2.87)*

If the City and the business class are seen as crucial movers in economic health, then such coverage must help the Conservatives. This is especially so if there is no counter-ideology providing constant reminders of the damage which the Conservatives and the City have actually done to the economy. In this sense virtually all the media could be seen as operating against the interests of Labour merely by reporting the movements and intentions of this class in the face of a Labour victory. *The Guardian*, for example, reported in March 1992 on its front page about the movement of millions of pounds out of the country:

*"Millions of pounds are leaving Britain with every opinion poll that puts the Opposition ahead, winging out via elec-*

*tronic transfer systems to all points of the compass."*

The article pointed out that £870 billion, or half of the total personal wealth (excluding houses) was controlled by just 5% of the population and that:

*"By freighting a large proportion of this mobile capital abroad, the rich are reducing further the spending power in the economy."*

A large transfer of capital into other currencies would also mean a run on the pound and that an incoming Labour government would be pushed into putting up interest rates.

*The Guardian* would not, of course, draw the same political conclusions from this as the right wing press, but the analysis is not so different from the front page "warnings" in papers such as the *Daily Mail*:

WARNING: A Labour government will

lead to higher mortgage payments. There is no doubt about it. Interest rates will rise within days of Kinnock entering Number Ten. (*Daily Mail* 7.4.92)

This was also the sense of the *Sun's* stark message on its election day front page:

*"If Kinnock wins today will the last person to leave Britain please turn out the lights (9.4.92.)"*

We can find other versions of such warnings on television news, in this case from a City expert speaking on ITN:

*"If Labour were to win, I think people would be worried about public spending, public borrowing and what might happen to the exchange rate." (ITN 12.30 1.4.92)*

It is perhaps no surprise that opinion poll research after the election showed serious worries amongst some voters about Labour's economic competence.

One of the questions raised at the time of the 1992 election was whether the media was responsible for Labour's defeat. The answer is that they must be seen as contributing to it since the issue of economic competence was so crucial. Shortly before the election, opinion polls showed Labour on approximately 40% of the popular vote and the Conservatives around 37%. The actual result gave the Conservatives 41.9% and Labour 34.2%. The 8% of voters separating the two parties might well have been influenced by the media, once these people were confronted with the possibility that an 'incompetent' and 'untrustworthy' Labour party would actually be elected.

But there is another point which underlines this - the responsibility which Labour had for the formation of its own image. It had vacated during the '80s key areas of political argument and this was why in the end it had no answer for those who moved against them. And these, it must be said, were a very small proportion of the electorate.

Larry Whitty, the Labour Party General Secretary, concluded in his report on the defeat that:

*"Fears of high tax plus the general unease about our economic competence or general distrust of the party and its leadership took its toll." (Report to NEC June 1992)*

It is certainly possible to point to comments and speeches by politicians such as John Smith, Brian Gould and Gordon Brown on issues such as the balance of payments and the low level of growth and investment. But there was no major drive to build an alternative popular understanding of what had gone wrong with the economy and what was to be done about it.

This also highlights a key difference between the British and US elections. The Democrats destroyed the Republicans by focussing relentlessly on the economic failures of Reagan and Bush. In the Labour Party Manifesto of 1992, there is no dis-

cussion of the Conservative economic record.

From 1987 the Labour Party approach had been to remove what was seen as the negative elements affecting voters and to stress the positive associations that the party made with the public (for example, the National Health Service). The assumption was that by keeping all the positive elements dancing before the consumers' eyes, the product will take on an acceptable 'glow'. But political decisions and beliefs are more complex than consumer purchases.

The problem with the approach of stressing the positive is that it neglects the underlying frameworks of understanding which people use to interpret new political information. For example, the underlying belief might be that a good Health Service or education system require a sound economy. If so, there is no point in stressing simply health and education even if the market research shows the party does 'well' on these issues.

The consequences of using an advertising philosophy for political selling had not been thought through. As one senior Labour Party worker from the Shadow Communications Agency remarked: "You went hard on the things you think will win you votes. But you can never do enough on health to make up for the economy."

The crucial issue for Labour is why it went into the election with only 40% of the vote. The Conservatives in thirteen years of government had achieved a series of 'records' which were unparalleled this century on riots, crime, unemployment, the destruction of manufacturing industry and the trade balance, as well as major controversies over health, education and the Poll Tax.

Labour did not develop a media strategy to highlight the key failures of the economy in the 1980s. Instead of using the media to establish popular understanding of what was going wrong and what should be done, they relied on the shallow science of Imagistics.

● This article is an edited version of a Research Report, *Politics, Media and Public Belief*.

**THE CPBF**  
have moved  
to 8 Cynthia Street  
London N1 9 JF  
Tel: 071 278 4430

## REVIEW

### SOUND STUFF

Some books on the media make your heart sink as you open their pages because they are self-indulgent, dealing with abstruse topics and written in a language remote from everyday usage. Getting the Message: News, Truth and Power (even the title avoids abstractness) definitely isn't one of them. It's a rational, relevant book which argues against some of the more ridiculous theories that influence academic media analysis. This book, the latest offering from the Glasgow University Media Group (GUMG), brings together the best of their recent work, and I hope it is widely read for a number of reasons.

The first is that, from time to time, we need to ask basic questions about what the point of media research is, and what directions should it follow. Chapters by the book's editor, John Eldridge, and Howard H. Davis tackle precisely these issues, and very clearly too.

Eldridge argues for a "form of resistance to the elusive, sometimes anonymous power which produces and suffuses the media" and for research in the areas of news management, information control and the role of public relations. It's the sort of work which "calls for tenacity and staying power" but would "articulate the relationships between government and the media and the tactics and strategies for control and resistance in that sphere."

The second reason for commendation is the series of very specific essays focusing on the linkages between the production, output and reception of media messages. The topics are rich and diverse, from David Miller on the Northern Ireland Information Service and Lucinda Broadbent on Nicaragua to work by Peter Beharrell and Jenny Kitzinger on AIDS.

Finally, I hope the overall concerns of the book will stimulate readers unfamiliar with the output of the GUMG to look at their other work. It's a sobering thought that *Bad News* came out in 1976, a time of relatively stable broadcasting institutions (the BBC/IBA duopoly), before the Annan Committee produced its report, before Channel 4 even. We're now living through an era of technological, political and institutional change but some issues have remained constant over the intervening years, including the role of the media when politically significant events are in focus. It's a tribute to the group's resilience that they have continued to raise issues and broadcasters' hackles by examining how controversial issues are treated on TV news. Granville Williams  
● The book is published by Routledge £12.99 and is available from CPBF Book Service (add 10% for p&p)

# OVER THERE: The Media and Labour in the United States

## Review by Granville Williams

ONE OF the best observers and writers on the US media is Ben Bagdikian. An example of his approach, in the magazine *Mother Jones* last year, dealt with the mess the US economy was in. Now it's the received wisdom that the 1980s caused the economic and social problems but, Bagdikian pointed out, "if you watched television and read the daily papers during that era, you did not receive a picture of the accumulating wreckage produced by Reaganism. You were fed a steady diet of positive news about the miracle of the 1980s, the brilliant achievements of the Reagan Revolution."

The explanation for what he mockingly calls 'the journalism of joy' was that the media owners, always happier with conservative Republicans in power, were positively ecstatic with Reagan. The Federal Communications Commission allowed takeovers of the three big networks by organisations which would have been unqualified under earlier standards. ABC went to Capital Cities, a large newspaper chain; NBC was taken over by the defence contractor, General Electric and CBS by a real-estate operator, Laurence Tisch.

The FCC also relieved broadcasters of public service requirements and lifted the limits on the number of stations a single corporation could acquire.

The owners of the press gained too. The daily news business, already controlled by monopolies in 98 per cent of US cities, was swept up by the biggest newspaper chains. In addition the National Labor Relations Board, stacked with pro-management members, sanctioned a ten year spree of union busting.

Such favourable treatment by the Reagan administration, plus the shift of corporate taxes on to the middle class and poor, led to reciprocal favours by the media owners. Reporters who tried to penetrate the propaganda barricade of the White House were blocked by their own management. Left on his own with reporters Reagan would have revealed himself to be one of the most ignorant men ever elected President, an uncomfortable insight when the White House wanted to project him as a shrewd genius in command of his administration.

These comments are to place in context an absorbing book with a very specific focus on the portrayal of labour in the US media. Through *Jaundiced Eyes* by William J. Puette ranges widely, with chapters on the movies, TV dramas and cartoons, as well as newspaper and TV news reporting. \* There's also a specific chapter which gives a detailed analysis of media coverage of a key dispute between the United Mineworkers of America and the Pittson Coal Group.

The book's thesis is straightforward. In the US only 15 percent of the nation's workforce is unionised and whereas in the past people were more likely to form their values, opinions and practical allegiances from a range of influences (family, neighbour, teacher, preacher or co-worker) these roles have been absorbed by the media. The experience of union organisation has become a remote one for the overwhelming mass of the US population, whilst the media's presence is pervasive in people's



lives.

The author quotes Jedidiah Leyland's remarks to the fictitious press mogul based on William Randolph Hearst in *Citizen Kane*: "You used to write an awful lot about the working man. But he's turned into something called organised labor. You're not going to like that one little bit when you find out it means that your working man expects something as his right, not your gift." In the chapter, 'The Movies: Labour Framed', Puette shows how the movies were happy to take up the banner of labour so long as it was disenfranchised, helpless and underprivileged. He compares the different treatment of two films, Biberman's *Salt of the Earth* and Kazan's *On the Waterfront*: "...the one film that portrayed a clean, worker-inspired union, *Salt of the Earth*, was viciously attacked, while a film that chose to look at the seamy side of the labor movement was given awards and the widest possible release."

●Through *Jaundiced Eyes: How the Media View Organized Labour* by William J. Puette ILR Press This book is one of the titles in the new media catalogue from CPBF.

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