

MONEY AND MURDOCH KEY TO DIGITAL BATTLE

THE RACE is on for control of Britain's airwaves in the early decades of the 21st century.

With publication of the Government's White Paper on Digital Terrestrial Broadcasting (DTB), the runners are clearly identified: on the inside track is our old friend Rupert Murdoch, offering digital TV via satellite within the next two years. On the outer track is the Department of National Heritage, hesitantly accompanied by a selection of British broadcasters and equipment manufacturers, holding out the promise of digital TV through more traditional land-based transmitters at some future date – DNH predicts 1997, while some cynical observers are taking out bets on never.

On the trophy table at the end of the race rests a tempting prize – the chance of becoming Britain's dominant provider of mass-broadcast audio-visual product to the country's 20 million homes, provided that the winner's cup is not snatched away by British Telecom or the cable TV industry.

Whatever the result, the repercussions of the contest will eventually ring out across the telecommunications industry, down the two-way circuits of interactive multimedia, and to the most distant nodes of the Internet.

The White Paper on DTB lays out proposals for the introduction of multi-channel digital broadcasting using new data compression techniques to squeeze the last possible channel out of the limited electromagnetic spectrum.

Six TV frequencies would be allocated to agencies called "multiplex providers", each capable of carrying at least three separate programmes. (Multiplexing is an electronic technique for mixing digital signals from several broadcasts into one continuous stream which can be transmitted on one frequency.)

In sound radio, seven "multiplexes" each carrying a minimum of six stereo channels will offer a total of more than 42 new radio channels.

TONY LENNON, BECTU
President and CPBF National
Chair, suggests policies for
the coming digital television
revolution



Even more channels of TV and radio could be made available if the multiplex operators were to use higher degrees of compression – packing pictures and sound into fewer digits – as long as the consumers were willing to accept the significant degradation of quality that this would cause. Similarly, higher quality could be offered in the form of wide-screen and high definition TV if the number of separate channels were cut back.

For existing broadcasters, the new technology is seen as a logical successor to the increasingly outdated analogue broadcasting system we have known for more than 50 years, which has almost reached its natural limit of five or six TV channels. BBC, ITV, and Channel 4, believe that, if DTB takes off, they should be allowed to migrate their broadcasts onto the new system, taking with them their public service obligations – a development that the government has more or less guaranteed, although the DNH Paper suggests that only 80 per cent of

mainstream TV and radio would automatically transfer onto a digital system.

Better still, say the existing broadcasters, they should be allowed to control their own multiplexers, since these are the gateways to the audience, and ought to be operated by organisations rooted in programme-making, instead of companies more interested in selling digital spectrum to all-comers.

None of them, however, has deep enough pockets to pay for the new transmission and coding equipment that will be needed to launch DTB. So the current broadcasters are already contemplating deals with commercial partners, in the hope that a mix of free-to-air PSB channels, together with subscription broadcasts, will present sufficient choice to tempt viewers into using the new digital system, with all its attendant costs.

Unfortunately for the public service broadcasters, the advent of digital terrestrial TV, described by Heritage Minister Virginia Bottomley as a "revolution", has not yet prompted would-be investors to run down Whitehall waving their chequebooks. Most potential players are waiting to see how hard the government is prepared to push viewers into a rapid transfer to digital, probably by allowing only a relatively short period in which to buy new equipment before the old transmitters are turned off, and there is also the problem of Murdoch's alternative technology.

News International, with enough spare cash it seems to buy entire global sports when necessary, confidently expects to have digital TV running on its satellites within a couple of years. Most pundits accept that this presents a serious challenge to DTB: for the 40-odd channels that land-based digital TV could offer, read 200-plus from satellite, and add to that Murdoch's existing customer base comprising millions of viewers already used to the idea of set-top tuning boxes and subscription charges.

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MEDIA MONITOR

CHANGES IN SCOTLAND'S MEDIA

The Thomson Corporation has sold its five Scottish newspapers for £172 million. The Barclay twins, owners of the European, purchased the 178-year old Scotsman, its sister paper Scotland on Sunday and the Edinburgh Evening News for £90 million. Northcliffe Newspapers, the regional newspaper arm of Lord Rothermere's Associated Newspapers, paid £82 million for Aberdeen's Press and Journal and Evening Express.

Thomson has already sold its UK regional titles to Trinity International for £326 million, and plans to use the money to finance moves into on-line information provision which many publishers believe will provide the fastest revenue growth in the future. Thomson plan to bid for West Publishing, the large and very profitable American information service, which owns the codification system for every court case held in the United States.

But for local voices in Scotland, particularly in Aberdeen, an area with strong nationalist and Liberal Democrat links, the takeover by Northcliffe Newspapers, part of a newspaper group intimately attached to the Conservatives, will be a cause for concern.

EUROMYTHS

An amusing but accurate analysis of the Euro equivalent to the loony left council stories has just been published. *Do You STILL believe all you read in the newspapers?* is a 24-page booklet published by the European Commission UK office which explores some of the common myths, establishes

Peace journal and green mag face writs

AN INTERNATIONAL peace journal and a small 'green' information magazine are both seeking to defend themselves from libel writs. Peace News and GreenLine magazine, as well as individuals involved with Campaign Against the Arms Trade, have all been served with writs by COPEX International Ltd., organisers of internal security, counter-insurgency and special operations equipment exhibitions.

Article appeared in Peace News, GreenLine and CAAT Newsletter months after a Dispatches TV programme, the subject of which was the evasion of export controls on certain prohibited goods. Companies known to exhibit at COPEX were exposed as being prepared to supply such goods as 'electro-shock' batons, a common tool of torturers.

COPEX state that Peace News and CAAT

where they came from and why. It also identifies some of the biggest offenders – the Daily and Sunday telegraph, the Daily Mail and the Mail on Sunday.

Charles Pownall of the EC's London office, who helped write the booklet, blames many of the stories on an active group of freelance journalists based in Brussels who peddle tales to news agencies, or lobby groups furthering their own interests or those of their clients. Once the stories are in print they become self-generating. "It may seem astonishing that stories that are not only untrue, but plain crazy, appear in print. But the problem is how can we answer back? Newspapers are reluctant to print corrections. And if the same story appears in many papers, that automatically gives it authenticity," he says.

WOT WON IT?

In *Britain's Media: How They Are Related* a chapter documents the impact of the Tory tabloids on the 1992 election result. The oft-quoted opinion by newspaper editors and proprietors that their papers don't influence people's opinions and voting patterns took another knock recently.

Martin Linton has spent a year poring over the opinion polls to find the evidence, and he delivered his findings in a Guardian sponsored lecture at Oxford University's Nuffield College on October 30. By aggregating data from ICM and MORI, two rival polling firms, he demonstrates that readers of the Tory-supporting Sun swung by 8 per cent to the Tories between the end of 1991 and polling day, whereas readers of the Labour-supporting Daily Mirror did not swing at all. If for that period all Sun buyers had taken the Mirror, the Tories would have won half a million fewer votes and 23 fewer seats, he calculates

Newsletter falsely accuse them of being "prepared to have dealings with, and to provide a market place for, companies or countries which manufacture or make use of torture equipment". The offending article in GreenLine was a short piece referring to an appeal by the National Peace Council, who faced £3,000 costs after apologising to COPEX for the content of an article in their newsletter. No statement of claim has yet been received by GreenLine, but COPEX state that their words "suggest that the settlement with the NPC was reached only on the grounds of expediency, and not because a serious libel had been committed".

All the publications have limited budgets, and would appreciate any offers of legal advice. Contact Craig or Andy at GreenLine. Tel 01726 850500

CHRIS BRENNAN analyses the proposals in the draft Defamation Bill

The alternative lottery

The court will have the power to dismiss claims 'with no real prospect of success' and in those cases with no arguable defence, to award damages up to £10,000 if this will adequately compensate the plaintiff.

The defence of innocent dissemination is clearly a necessary and welcome change, designed to deal with new technological developments, in particular the Internet. The new law will absolve people not primarily responsible for its publication from responsibility for any defamatory material carried on their systems.

The new proposals on the plaintiff's entitlement to damages mean that the publisher will now be able to adduce evidence of all facts liable to affect the reputation of the plaintiff, and is designed to prevent the plaintiff being over-compensated for damage to a reputation which may be significantly different from that claimed.

Whatever the merits of the suggested changes, the most conspicuous aspect is the omission of proposals that could ease the stifling effect of libel on freedom of expres-

sion. The law of libel certainly encourages professional and accurate journalism, but it can also prevent important and interesting information from entering the public domain. This 'chilling effect' stems from the fact that a journalist's source may be reluctant to attest to his comments in open court and from the difficulty caused by the restrictive rules of evidence applicable to court cases.

When this is placed against the background of million pound awards then many a story, the truth of which the writer may be totally sure, will be abandoned rather than face the minefield of litigation. This is particularly so for those publishers who do not have vast financial reserves.

The European Commission on Human Rights recently ruled that the £1.5 million awarded against Count Tolstoy was a breach of his right to freedom of expression under article 10 of the European Convention of Human Rights. The Commission was also highly critical of the appeal procedure which allows the Court of Appeal to reduce (and increase) the size of awards. The matter

is now being considered by the European Court. In the light of this decision, surely the time has come to create a less oppressive system for compensating the victims of libel.

Empowering the court to order that the victim be given a suitable apology or right of reply would mitigate the damage caused by a libellous publication and reduce the need to award huge financial compensation. One argument for retaining heavy punitive damages is that they are needed to punish wayward publishers. However, the power to seriously interfere with a publisher's right to freedom of expression would continue to provide an adequate deterrent for those intent on abusing their freedom. Reducing the amount of damages awarded in libel cases may also have a trickle down effect on the size of lawyer's fees and court costs.

This argument appears to have been recognised by the Lord Chancellor in the suggestions for dealing with cases summarily. A far more radical change is now called for, making such a policy applicable to all libel actions and not just to those considered to be trivial. Only where the victim of a libel can show that they have suffered equivalent financial loss as a result of a libellous attack, should they be given a winning lottery ticket. Mud may stick but it doesn't take a million pounds to wash it off.

Labour MP CLIVE SOLEY takes issue with media crime coverage

Press and prejudice

recent examples of cases where the press have occasionally distorted the facts for the sake of a good story.

No one can dispute that the press has a responsibility to report crime, but there are other responsibilities to be recognised. The first is towards those accused, but not convicted, of a particular crime or crimes. Everyone accused of criminal activity in this country is, or should be, innocent until proven guilty. Equality before the law and the administration of justice free from corruption is the guarantee for each individual that the democratic process can work for them. Prejudicial or inaccurate reporting jeopardises this guarantee and has serious implications for civil liberties.

The second responsibility is to keep such stories in perspective. Fear of crime – particularly amongst the elderly – is far greater than the reality of crime. We know

that many elderly people are afraid to go out especially at night and this seriously affects the quality of their lives. In fact they are far less likely to be victims of street crime than are young males who are the most common victims – however, faced with gruesome colour photos of mugged grannies on many front pages, it is easy to believe otherwise.

The third responsibility is to examine stories that deal with the possible solutions to crime. There is one solution that the press love to emphasise and that is punishment – the tougher the better. Why? Because it is a common fallacious belief that tough punishment stops crime. In fact many people don't necessarily want tough punishment but they may well want it in a particular case where they feel angry and vengeful about the crime in question. So the press fulfils a role of articulating what the

editors believe are the desires of their readers. But it has been proven time and again that punishment alone has virtually no effect on the level of crime.

Crime prevention measures are known to be far more effective than simply increasing the length of prison sentences or making the regimes tougher. But crime prevention means talking about public expenditure on security measures, better street lighting, more people in public caretaking roles whose presence is known to be an effective deterrent to crime, nursery provision particularly in deprived areas where quality of parenting may be a big problem, facilities for young people and jobs or real training for the unemployed.

Crime prevention is an issue the press could campaign on and in consequence remove some of the blight of crime from the lives of their readers. But why bother doing that, when calling for more police powers and tougher sentences fits better with the political philosophy they support and gives them the type of simplistic 'string 'em up' headlines they love and need.

It's just a pity about the victims who are forgotten in this process.

C5 AND THE ITC

Doing the right thing

THE NEW 'light touch' Independent Television Commission has come out smelling of roses with its decision to award the Channel 5 licence on the grounds of programming quality.

The 'quality not price' decision was based on Channel 5 Broadcasting's emphasis on diversity, peak time news and current affairs, original programming and all round quality.

UKTV's bid - the highest - failed the programme quality threshold because it did not offer sufficient high-quality programmes catering for a wide range of tastes and interests, according to the ITC chair, Sir George Russell.

Virgin, who bid an identical £22,002,000 with C5 Broadcasting, failed because they did not give sufficient time to high quality news and current affairs.

Of course there are details of the process which the ITC can't be held responsible for - including the ludicrous and discredited concept of the franchise auction.

But it is ironic that this time the ITC has used the full range of its discretionary powers to make its decision.

This is something it failed to do when it took the ITV London weekday licence away from Thames - now owned by Pearson TV - in 1991 and gave it to Carlton.

PHIL SCRATON, ANN JEMPHREY
AND SHEILA COLEMAN

THE HILLSBOROUGH Project's first report gave an in-depth analysis of media coverage and its impact in the aftermath of the disaster. The report dealt with the issues raised by the use of explicit photographs and graphic descriptions of the dead, dying and injured.

While it accepted that the journalists, broadcasters and photographers were suddenly confronted with tragedy, when they were at Hillsborough to report an FA Cup semi-final, the key issues centred on news production and editorial responsibility.

As the extent of the disaster became evident and reporters descended on Sheffield and Liverpool, there were numerous incidents of unacceptable and intrusive journalism. These included attempts to photograph the dead during the transfer of bodies from the ground to the mortuary; entering hospital wards without authorisation; doorstepping the bereaved; posing as social workers to access stories and monitoring funerals.

While the very drama, tragedy and randomness of disasters give their coverage a sharp public interest, it was the style and form of the media attention, as well as the content, which was unacceptable.

As the full impact of the disaster unfolded over the days that followed, attention inevitably focused on causation and responsibility. What emerged were widely-reported allegations, particularly from police sources, of hooliganism, violence and drunkenness. It was a consistent line, that Liverpool supporters arrived late, drunk and aggressive, determined to gain entry to the ground, whatever the consequences.

With allegations prevailing over violence, robbery and degradation, the intensity of criticism directed toward Liverpool supporters' behaviour was remarkable, particularly because those accused were survivors of the disaster.

The intensity of this orchestrated attack was further exploited and extended to include

The second report on the Hillsborough disaster has just been published.* Here the authors present some of their findings

Violence to the truth

Merseyside, as a region beset by violence, militancy and arrogance.

When the region's population turned out to show solidarity and compassion for those who died and who were bereaved, this was reported as a public display of 'self-indulgence', 'self-pity' and 'mawkishness'. And so the specific untruths of the events at Hillsborough were compounded by more general untruths about Merseyside.

What was significant was that throughout the aftermath the local coverage differed markedly. Generally, but not always, it reflected a shared responsibility to the needs of the local community, both in terms of refuting unfounded allegations and the provision of a more balanced account of the events surrounding the disaster.

PROMOTING THE MYTH

The second report, *No Last Rights*, devotes two chapters to an analysis of media coverage since the immediate aftermath. It develops two distinct, but closely related themes: the myths of Hillsborough and the negative reputation of Merseyside.

In analysing the press coverage of key events, such as the Taylor Inquiry, the inquests and other legal procedures, it examines and exposes how the agenda set in the immediate aftermath persisted.

On each occasion, every public statement, inside or outside court hearings, concerning drunken, abusive or violent behaviour was given prominence.

These themes, prevalent in the press, gave credibility to and conferred legitimacy on controversial evidence given by police witnesses and local residents to the inquests.

Once the court hearings were under way the media coverage took on an important dimension in terms of its impact. It is difficult to appreciate, for example, how the inquest jury, all Sheffield people, could erase the powerful imagery from its collective mind.

Beyond the key 'moments' in the aftermath - the Taylor Inquiry; compensation cases; the inquests; the death of Tony Bland; the judicial review - there are many occasions when Hillsborough was linked directly to other soccer events. Whenever controversy arose - English fans in Rotterdam and Manchester United fans in Turkey were just two examples - the media responded with spurious, misinformed and gratuitous references to Hillsborough.

On 14 October, 1993, following the Rotterdam incident, David Evans, MP stated on Radio 4's Today programme:

The Hillsborough Disaster, as everyone in football knows although they won't say it, was caused by thousands of fans turning up without tickets, late and drunk. And here we have it again in Rotterdam. Drunken fans turning up late without tickets and causing trouble. When are we going to get protection from these yobbos? [emphasis added]

The statement was allowed to stand, unchallenged. It represented a denial of the Taylor

findings and was a discredited assumption yet Radio 4 allowed it to be broadcast as fact.

On 30 June 1994 Sir Bernard Ingham, former Press Secretary to Margaret Thatcher and a Daily Express columnist, wrote:

Ever since Lord Chief Justice Taylor of Gosforth whitewashed the drunken slob who caused the Hillsborough football disaster by storming the perimeter wall I have had my beady eye on this jurist.

Despite vigorous protests from bereaved families and the Merseyside Branch of the Football Supporters Association and a statement of disassociation from Sir Nicholas Lloyd, then Editor of the Daily Express, no retraction was forthcoming from Ingham. In fact, in letters to survivors and bereaved families he hardened his position by commenting that the "guilty ones" at Hillsborough were the "tanked up mob". Ingham used his privileged access to the media to vilify the reputations of those who died and to publish ill-informed opinion as fact.

When Brian Clough's autobiography was published in October 1994 Ian Wooldridge, the much-acclaimed Daily Mail sports writer, gave significant coverage to Clough's allegations that "those Liverpool fans who died were killed by Liverpool people". These remarks were widely covered in the press and on television. The impact, coming from someone who was at Hillsborough but, as he admits in his autobiography, saw nothing of the disaster as it unfolded, was immense among the survivors and bereaved.

The Daily Mail responded to one of its largest postbags ever by publishing seven letters supporting Clough's unsubstantiated allegations and five against. Yet none of the seven were at Hillsborough and each simply echoed the prejudices and bigotry of previous media coverage. It was as if Hillsborough, in terms of the myths that surrounded it, had become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

The statements by Evans, Ingham and Clough amounted to allegations of murder and manslaughter. Aimed against individuals they would have resulted in court action yet they could target survivors collectively with impunity. The media provides no collective right of reply, right of privacy or right of redress.

Following the detailed analysis of the press coverage post-Hillsborough the report devotes a chapter to the recent debates over media regulation, press and broadcasting accountability and the right to privacy. Much of this debate has focused on the Royal family, the 'rich and famous' or minor television celebrities and their personal lives and relationships. While many of these people have relatively powerful voices of protest, they also 'court' the media to enhance their reputations.

For them dealings with the media are constant two-way processes. The report, however, was concerned with the protection of 'ordinary people' whose lives suddenly are taken over by tragic events which have considerable public interest. What of their rights to privacy, to reply, to redress?

*NO LAST RIGHTS; *The Denial of Justice and the Promotion of Myth in the Aftermath of the Hillsborough Disaster.*

A paperback, *No Last Rights*, has been published. It can be obtained from: The Hillsborough Project, Centre for Studies in Crime and Social Justice, Edge Hill University College, Ormskirk, Lancashire L39 4QP. Please make cheque for £9.95 inc P&P payable to Liverpool City Council.

Free Press will be returning to this topic in the next issue. Steve Kelly, author of *Back Page Football*, will be contributing a piece.

Money and Murdoch key to digital TV battle

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In an environment where the consumer will decide, the operator who gets a foot through the door first could clean up, as Murdoch demonstrated when (unregulated) Sky TV's early start in UK satellite broadcasting helped to wipe out the technically superior (and publicly regulated) BSB. There are genuine fears that, if Murdoch plays his cards right, the government's model of land-based digital TV may never get off the ground.

In the wings are the Cable TV companies, already providing multi-channel TV feeds to millions of homes, and BT who hope to do the same in every household with a telephone

as soon as government allows them to carry live TV programmes on their circuits. Tony Blair's deal with BT promises this sooner rather than later, much to the chagrin of the predominantly American-owned Cable companies, who have spent ten years and billions of pounds building up their networks on the assumption that BT's natural monopoly would never be allowed to corner the market.

BT and Cable still face enormous investment costs before either could offer every home in the UK a multi-channel broadcasting service which would compete with digital TV, but have one major potential advantage: two-way circuits, an essential component of the fully-wired interactive multi-media society

that futurists predict for the next century. Digital TV, whether on the DNH or Murdoch system, cannot provide access to libraries of information, on-line banking and shopping, or the point-to-point transfers of data which will characterise the information society. Commercially these could become just as important as the provision of traditional TV and radio audio-visual services - putting TV down the wire is easy - and the operator who provides the two-way cable into every home could end up as the long term winner. Digital TV could be the big action for the next 20 years, but broadband two-way communication circuits to every consumer may be the main story for the rest of the 21st century.

The breakneck speed of developments in the media and information sectors make it impossible to adopt policies covering every issue, but the following points are one possible guide to the CPBF's attitudes.

- 1 Emphasis must be placed on the content of any new distribution system. The question of what new programmes or services will be provided, and by whom, is in danger of drowning in the techno-babble that has grown up around the information society.
- 2 Access to information and entertainment will become even more of a social issue as developments progress. Every quantum leap in the growth of the information society implies higher and higher costs to the

consumer, with the risk of millions being disenfranchised.

- 3 Government has an obligation to sustain, and regulate, the public provision of culture, entertainment and information. This goes further than facilitating the migration of public service broadcasters onto new technology - everything in the public domain from libraries galleries and museums, through art and education, to the citizen's participation in the democratic process, must somehow be eased into the new environment.
- 4 New concepts of ownership and control are needed in a world where it will often be difficult to draw lines between different media products, let alone determine

who provided the component parts.

- 5 In the short to medium-term, those who believe in public regulation for the public good may do well to give full support to Digital Terrestrial Broadcasting, roughly on the lines proposed by Government. It is a natural refuge for existing public service broadcasters (love them or hate them they're all we have), and the technology allows for positive direction by elected governments. Murdoch's satellites are beyond regulation, for all practical purposes; similarly, the global networks that wired-up Britain may one day connect to, are already proving to be ungovernable by any national, regional or even global regulator.

WITHOUT COMMENT

“Our customers – the advertisers – have let us know very clearly what they think when they see the broadcasting brand leader slipping.”

Barry Cox,
Director of ITV Association

Networking, the bulletin for the ITV Network Centre, September 1995.

“Privatisation of the BBC is back on the agenda. A misdirected memo has disclosed that the Beeb’s moguls are feverishly trying to work out the best way to privatise its transmission service, the division that runs the network of 1,400 transmitters round the country... It is astonishing that water and electricity should have been sold years ago, while the Beeb remains untouched. Yet it is so neatly divided into bite-sized pieces that it could almost have been purpose built for privatisation, with its two UK television stations, five national radio stations, umpteen local radio outposts and the Worldwide business which operates a global television service and exports more than any other media group.”

William Kay

The City Editor’s Column, Mail on Sunday, 22 October 1995.

“So we feel we must continue our dialogue with Tony Blair to the point where we can accurately reflect our opinion of him come the election: whether to attack him, remain neutral or even endorse him. Nearer the day, this is something I will discuss with our Editors, and then take their views, and mine, to our proprietor for final judgement. That day is still a long way away. But musing aloud over a lunch with Lord Rothermere this week I tried to visualise how our editorials might read should we support Blair in the next election. ‘Could such a thing be even be possible?’ I wondered. ‘Well, it certainly would not be impossible, David,’ he replied, having recently come back from a two hour one-to-one with the Labour leader.”

Sir David English

Chairman of Associated Newspapers in The Spectator, 7 October 1995

Party line gives way to the bottom line

ANDREW HIGGINS

MOSCOW – The first telephone call came from a senior aide of President Boris Yeltsin in the early days of the war in Chechnya. The Kremlin had a message for Russia’s only independent television channel, NTV: Tone down your critical coverage of the war or risk being shut down.

NYV, privately funded and independent minded, told the Kremlin to mind its own business. Remarkably, albeit very reluctantly, it did.

Six months later another pioneer of Russia’s independent media, the daily newspaper Nezavisimaya Gazeta, also received a call from the government. This time it came from the office of the prime minister, Victor Chernomyrdin. The call was more friendly. Also far more difficult to ignore.

The government phoned the paper’s founding editor, Vitaly Tretyakov, to ask if it might somehow help him to stave off bankruptcy. His publication, once a vibrant symbol of the excitement and daring of the glasnost era, had become a charity case. While NTV inspired anger, Nezavisimaya Gazeta stirred only pity.

Together the two phone calls illustrate how money has replaced politics as the dominant force now shaping Russia’s raucous post-Soviet media, where market forces increasingly prevail but where also scrutiny of the bottom line can sometimes create dangers even more menacing than the old party line. Money is rapidly eroding the bureaucratic lines of command what once tethered the media to the state apparatus. It has also introduced new risks. For impecunious journals like Nezavisimaya Gazeta the market has meant bankruptcy.

For more lucrative ventures, particularly television, the market has meant unprecedented independence, but also crime and graft. In the tragic case of Vladislav Listyev, an immensely popular television executive, journalist and talk show host, it meant a fatal bullet in the head.

Television, the only medium capable of reaching a population of more than 150 million, spread over 11 time zones, wields enormous influence in Russia. And it is this branch of the media over which the state has been most reluctant to relinquish control. When the Kremlin phoned NTV last December, it was merely doing what

Moscow officials have always done. More important than the Kremlin’s warning, yet another spasm of Soviet-era instincts, was NTV’s response. Like American television networks during the Vietnam War 30 years before, NTV continued to hammer away, bringing the blood of what the government had wanted to keep a distant conflict into every living room. Its ratings and reputation soared; Yeltsin’s popularity plunged.

Driving the transformation of Russia’s electronic media are skyrocketing rates. NTV now charges up to \$30,000 a minute for a prime time slot. The promise of huge profits has also made state TV channels more responsible to the market than to political diktat – and unleashed a messy and sometimes bloody struggle for control.

Ostankino, the country’s largest television network, has been reorganised to form a new company, Russian Public Television. The state still controls 51 per cent, but the rest has been sold off to private firms and banks.

The Russian Cosmopolitan is the most successful

It was this reorganisation that is thought to have triggered the murder of Listyev in March. The killing remains unsolved. The motive, though, seems reasonably clear. He was shot dead shortly after he had announced plans to reorganise the sale of advertising time. His proposed reform cut into the squalid network of corruption that had previously allowed shadowy middlemen and independent producers to siphon off millions of dollars in revenue.

Outside television most journalists wrestle with a more mundane, but often more urgent predicament. What scares them is poverty, not the dangers posed by new riches. Nezavisimaya is not the only publication to find itself hobbled by the marketplace. Also shut down last summer were Kuranty, another product of the glasnost era, and the more recent Novaya Yeshednevnyaya Gazeta. A string of smaller specialist papers, including those for lawyers and lumberjacks, have also ceased publication.

As more fragile publications are forced to close, the market has spawned a host of new Russian titles, many of them produced jointly with foreign publishing giants. The most successful of these is the Russian edition of Cosmopolitan.

Andrew Higgins was Moscow correspondent for The Independent. This is an edited version of his piece in the IPI Report, September/October 1995



On the platform: (l to r) Bob Franklin, Sue Griffiths, Nicholas Jones

Sink or spin?

SALLY BAILEY reports on the CPBF North launch meeting

WHAT have cornflakes, Kevin Keegan and Neil Kinnock’s Aunt Sadie got to do with politics?

“Absolutely nothing” according to Bob Franklin, except as illustrations of the trivialisation of what passes for political communication today.

He and Nicholas Jones, BBC political correspondent, and author of Soundbites and Spin Doctors, were speaking at Packaging Politics, the first public meeting of CPBF North in its new office at the Kirklees Media Centre, Huddersfield.

With not a spare seat in the house, the meeting, chaired by Sue Griffiths, provided a stimulating debate on the current state of political reporting in the media.

Bob Franklin proposed that the media corrupt as well as communicate and that while mass communication should have the benign result of informing more people better, it has, in fact, resulted in issues being trivialised, sustained debate giving way to gimmickry, imagery and political naivete.

As the involvement by the media in dictating the length and nature of political communication grows, and political reporting is reduced to the 15 second soundbite and ultimately a mere photo-opportunity, so does the ignorance of the public on serious political issues.

Packaging politics, Bob Franklin summed up, “undermines participation in democracy; like watching football, participation has become vicarious, ersatz and second hand. The consumers of packaged politics are not empowered consumers, they are very passive consumers and they are being flogged a pretty duff product...”

Nicholas Jones examined the journalist’s dilemma in the three-cornered battle between the reporter’s integrity, the manipulation of the media by politicians, and the constraints put on political reporting by the media itself whereby market forces and commercial pressures dictate the style, content and length of news items. In a potentially no-win situation, journalists are under pressure from both politicians and their own management to toe the line.

Conspiracy theory is all the rage in spin doctor circles – Jones described how he was accused by Peter Mandelson at the recent Labour Party conference of “trying to ferment riot and rebellion” among constituency Labour parties when he rejected a piece of Blair-friendly spin in favour of a piece on the thorny issue of the minimum wage. He defended our right to know how the media is manipulated, as politics and the media become increasingly inseparable.

Both speakers took questions from the audience on these and other issues raised, among them the role of media ownership. Bob Franklin ended with a plea for greater support for public service broadcasting, free from both political and market pressures.

The meeting proved that there are plenty of people who want to participate in debate – the issue is not only whether politicians manipulate the media or vice versa but also that both the media and the politicians in collusion are manipulating the people. In Bob Franklin’s words, “political communication has become a disturbingly quiet business, and it ought to be bloody noisy – and it ought to be noisy in public forums like this.”

BOOKS

Television: An International History
Edited by Anthony Smith. Oxford £25.00

This is both a visually enjoyable (over 180 colour and black and white illustrations) and informative book. It makes large claims and covers an enormous range of material – “the first authoritative illustrated international history of this most influential cultural phenomenon” – but I think it realises them.

Organised in four sections, it draws on a range of writers to provide valuable insights and perspectives. Part One, Origins and Institutions, deals with the invention of television and its development in both public service and commercial forms; Part Two covers Forms and Genres; Part Three, Television and Society; Part Four, Television Across the World; and an Epilogue assesses the likely impact of television in coming years. There’s also a very useful Further Reading section

It’s certainly the sort of book that needs to be on college library shelves and available for students who want to get a clear introduction to the areas covered. It should also be a very useful stimulus for assignment ideas and research topics.

The Cross Media Revolution; Ownership and Control

Tim Congdon, Andrew Graham, Damian Green and Bill Robinson
John Libby £10.00

A very useful collection of essays, written from different political perspectives and tackling some of the issues thrown up as technology revolutionises our media. The BBC commissioned the authors – economists and policy advisers – to look at competition in the UK media market and ask whether it will deliver the range of voices needed in a free society.

Tim Congdon warns that the “multi-media revolution must not threaten the success of British broadcasting in nurturing cultural diversity and political pluralism” and points out that “left to themselves, commercial interests are unlikely to be much interested in meeting these conditions”

Compared with writings emanating from the uncritical lobby for cross-media liberalisation there is much that is relevant and valuable here. For those who want to identify some of the crucial issues raised by the question “What form of media industry is consistent with our democratic society?” this collection of essays provides a good starting point.

NOTICES

CPBF NOTICES

In FP 88 we announced an ambitious fund raising target of £25,000 to enable us to gear up our work towards the next general election. The money will be used to launch a new Media Manifesto to stimulate debate about the policies we need to promote diverse and democratic media into the 21st century; a pamphlet on the Information Superhighway; and a second edition of *Britain's Media: How They Are Related*.

We'd like to thank USDÄW for a £100 donation and UNISON North West for their generous donation of £390 – the money was raised at the North West Night held at the 1995 UNISON Conference. In addition many individual members have sent donations as they have renewed their membership. Thank you.

As part of our efforts we are producing a new membership leaflet, designed by Sally Bailey, and are producing a leaflet, signed by media and artistic celebrities

CPBF NOTICES

such as John Pilger, urging support for the CPBF in the pre-election months.

Please do all you can to help us raise the much needed finance. If you can get a friend or your college, union branch or political organisation to affiliate it would help us enormously.

We also have a standing order form which enables you to pay a regular amount to our Wages Appeal. If you can afford to, please take one out so that we can take on the extra staff to deal with the demands generated by our pre election plans.

CPBF POSTCARDS

Ideal to publicise CPBF concerns on Press Freedom and Media Ownership, the set of six postcards with images by Steve Bell, Paul Morton, Tim Sanders and Jamel Akib cost £2.00 inc P&P.

CPBF BOOK SERVICE NEW AND POPULAR TITLES

Soundbites and Spin Doctors
by Nicholas Jones; Cassell £17.99

An excellent insider's account of the battle between the politicians and the news media, plus marvellous photos, including Kenneth Clarke and Michael Portillo looking like mafia hit-men.

Manufacturing Consent
by Edward S Herman and Noam Chomsky
Vintage £8.99

A classic, dissecting how the marketplace and the economics of publishing shape the news.

An Introduction to Political Communication
by Brian McNair; Routledge £12.99

A new book examining the way the media is used by political actors of all kinds, from presidents and prime ministers, to trade unionists and environmental groups. A clear, accessible introduction.

The Enemy Within: The Secret War Against the Miners
by Seumas Milne; Pan £5.99

Out in paperback with new material, the book reveals the astonishing lengths the Conservative government and its secret services were prepared to go to to destroy the power of the NUM.

The Media Trilogy: Gotcha!, Selling Hitler and Good and Faithful Servant
by Robert Harris; Faber £9.99

Excellent insights into the media world, from the Falklands War to Maggie's media fixer, Bernard Ingham.

Send cheque with order (add 10 per cent to cover P&P) to CPBF National Office.

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