

## FREEDOM OF INFORMATION ACT

# IS IT IN THE BAG?

"SCOTT is much more than the criticism of the individual actions of certain Ministers. It is living, breathing testament to the culture of secrecy that exists in Britain," Derek Fatchett MP, Labour front bench spokesperson on foreign affairs, said at a meeting in Leeds recently. (see report, pp 4-5) He also made clear in the same speech Labour's commitment to a Freedom of Information Act.

This is one issue which Labour could act on quickly once it is in office, and would have widespread support. It would also signal an end to one of the more reprehensible practices of old Labour in the form of the Callaghan government. Tony Benn noted in his diaries how resistant Jim Callaghan, Merlyn Rees and other senior Labour figures were to the idea of a Freedom of Information Act.

We now know that in spite of successive Labour Party conference resolutions, Callaghan blocked and delayed movement on this, and as the programme 'Cabinet' in the Secret Society series reveals, in the dying days of the Callaghan government, in desperation he was willing to do a deal to support the Liberal MP, Clement Freud, who had a Private Member's Bill for a Freedom of Information Act. The price of support was that Freud missed a crucial Commons vote. Freud didn't, and the Callaghan government fell.

Also Labour governments of the 1970s

tried to stop publication of the Crossman diaries, passed the first Prevention of Terrorism Act, and deported an American journalist for allegedly obtaining security secrets, and pursued two others under the Official Secrets Act 1911 (the ABC case).

So it would be a clear signal that Labour was making a radical break with the culture of secrecy, accentuated by 17 years of one-party rule. The difficulties of gaining access to information from government and the



Derek Fatchett: Labour committed to Freedom of Information Act

range of non-elected bodies created by privatisation, NHS trusts, and the trail of quangos, has increased enormously.

At the Leeds meeting Derek Fatchett was

asked what such a Freedom of Information Act would include, because the detail is crucial. After all, what is excluded from an Act under the umbrella term 'national interest' could emasculate it as an instrument to open up the secret decisions of government, the civil service and the security services.

Here Derek Fatchett was less forthcoming, but he hoped that Shadow Heritage Secretary Jack Cunningham was carrying a draft Bill around with him in his briefcase. We hope so too, because what the Scott Inquiry and Report underline is the totally accidental way we at present find out some of the more disturbing aspects of the culture of secrecy and arrogance which dominates the upper echelons of Whitehall and Westminster.

Of course a Freedom of Information Act isn't going to instantly remedy the corrosive effects of years of Tory rule, but it will be an important practical step and a clear symbol that in this area Labour will do things differently.

And, if Jack Cunningham hasn't got a draft Bill in his bag, he might like to look over the ideas and proposals in The Right to Know Bill which got extensive support. The government blocked the Bill by talking it out at its Report stage on July 2 1993. It's a nice little irony that William Waldegrave was the minister responsible for open government at the time!

## Without Comment

"It is still a rare journalist who does not in some way believe that the press has a duty to ensure that lies are exposed. Yet, with a few distinguished exceptions, most of us have not made as much effort as we should have over Scott. Collectively we stand accused of laziness, treating it as a one-day wonder and not burrowing more assiduously into the mass of lies documented in the report.

Yes I know all the excuses. Only a magician could turn the whole of Scott's 2000 pages into a few punchy newspaper pages within a matter of hours. I accept that we did our best. Only the Memory Man could expect to rebut every lie the Government has gone on telling about the report's findings this week. And Scott himself did the hacks few favours by producing so many pages and nuanced conclusions and expecting anyone to make sense of it all.

Even so, and with all that said, I think the press – and the broadcasting media in particular – have let the story go too quickly and too lazily, principally because it is too much trouble to follow it through. In a world of diminishing literacy, in which people apparently do not read anything any longer, it is perhaps unreasonable to expect journalists any more than anyone else to read Scott's hundreds of densely argued pages. But the media's relative neglect of Scott's text and revelations are striking, nevertheless, especially given the claims we make and the public position we crave.

Why, for example, has the television not produced a more systematic explanation of Scott's findings? Why have so many newspapers – though not this one – reduced Scott to the odd down-page story about whether this or that MP is wavering? Is it because all the questions arising from the report have been asked? Of course not. Why has Labour had to do so much digging that the press should have been doing itself? Why have government departments been given an easy time? Where is Alan Clark and why hasn't he been carved into pieces about the report?

We, in the media, spend a lot of time berating politicians for this or that failing, often with reason. But we have a lot to answer for about Scott ourselves. We haven't stuck at it. We haven't played our part. If the government survives, it is partly our fault. Not that we're duplicitous, you understand. Merely idle."

**Martin Kettle**  
*The Guardian, 24.2.96*

"Over the last 17 years (as is well known) there has been created a huge British nomenclatura with whom the Labour Party can scarcely live and who can scarcely live with the Labour Party.....Labour can expect nothing but hostility from them.

As it can almost certainly expect from the British press. Blair has been doing his best to woo the press lords and there is no harm in trying. If the Labour Party can thereby secure reasonably fair treatment it is obviously worth the effort. But Labour should not count on it; and as the election approaches it should count on it even less. What props up the Conservative Party is an immensely powerful system, of which the 'Conservative' press has been an essential element, designed to resist any modification to the society the contemporary Conservative Party has created. And the more it is threatened the more it will resist....

A Labour government (would) stand in a stronger relation to the media than a Labour opposition. The great media empires of the late 20th century – virtually all of them deeply hostile to Labour Parties everywhere – were created not simply by the free market but also by the governments who determine (or are able to determine) the legislative framework in which the media operate. And what a government has made it can unmake; something Mr Blair could usefully intimate to assorted media moguls."

**Ross McKibbin**

*"If/when Labour gets in..." London Review of Books*

# Hacks fail story test

"THE national thick-ulum" (Sun). "Trendies produce a lesson in failure" (Daily Telegraph), "the betrayal of a whole generation" (Daily Mail), "Pupils betrayed by teaching disaster" (Daily Express).

They came looking for failure and they found it. Well before Gillian Shephard turned up for the start of the DFEE press conference, at an atypically early 8.30 am, the bleary-eyed education hacks had it sussed.

"The big story here is that half of 11 year olds have failed in maths and English," said one respected correspondent down his mobile to the news desk. But in their haste to write a story about failing schools they failed to pick up the real story – that Sir Ron Dearing recommended, and Mrs Shephard has accepted, changes to assessment and testing and that both endorse the principle of teacher assessment.

However, editors wanted copy to stoke the fires of collective panic over education. The hysterical headlines were a foregone conclusion.

Never mind that well over three quarters of seven year olds reached or surpassed Level 2 in the core subjects of England, maths and science, apart from spelling where the score was two thirds. Never mind that around 60 per cent of 14 year olds achieved Level 5 or above in English, maths and science on their teachers' assessments with 56 per cent reaching this level on their test scores. Nor that 64 per cent of 11 year olds achieved Level 4 or above in science on their teachers' assessments, a figure that actually rose to 70 per cent in the tests.

This was not failure and therefore was not a story. The f-word was banded around as the media homed in on the disappointing results for 11 year

olds in maths (54 per cent reaching Level 4 by teaching assessment, 44 per cent by test) and English (56 per cent at Level 4 on assessment and 48 per cent in the tests). In the throes of moral panic, most of the media conveniently ignored the fact that teachers feel aggrieved that the tests do not reflect their pupils' achievements in lessons, particularly at 11.

The cause of the under-achievement is not to be found in incompetent teachers or the Daily Mail fantasy world of "trendy" teaching methods which have been well-founded educational practice at least since the word trendy found currency 30 years ago. The answer is clear for those who choose to see.

Education Secretary Gillian Shephard described the result of the tests as "good but it is not enough", expressed confidence in the value of teacher assessment, and highlighted the need to "improve the diagnostic value of the tests" No teacher bashing there. On the contrary, she endorsed Sir Ron Dearing's recommendations for increased support for teachers, for some tweaking of the tests, including alternative models of assessment of Shakespeare at Key Stage 3, and for a reconsideration of external marking because of concern over its quality.

Mrs Shephard has also accepted that the results of tests at 11 cannot be used by secondary schools as a basis for selecting pupils. These judgements are light years away from the hysteria of the headlines. They were available to the media at the same time as the test results, but they were ignored.

*This is an edited version of the article which appeared in the March issue of The Teacher, journal of the National Union of Teachers.*

"A MOMENTOUS year...in which we were finally taken off probation and given the green light to get on with working to provide a first class complaints service to the public."

A cheering message from Lord Wakeham of the Press Complaints commission to all of the old soaks in the Last Chance Saloon who have been enjoying the longest drinking up time in recorded history. It is five years since the Press Complaints Commission was launched on a suspicious world as the print industry's way of staving off statutory controls of the press

With former Tory Chief Whip now in charge (when he is not engaged in his many other part-time directorships) the PCC has indeed enjoyed something of a renaissance – it is beginning to believe in itself, and complaints are up.

There were 2,508 complaints in 1995, a 30 per cent increase – not because standards are falling of course, just because the PCC is better known. The evidence? Well, only 28 complaints were upheld by the PCC. So that's all right then.

In almost half the complaints (1,026) there was 'no case to pursue'; and about one third (800) fell conveniently outside the PCC's remit (so much for being better known by the public). An 'unjustifiable delay' in making complaints (naughty public) disallowed another 91. And 77 were disregarded because they came from third parties (e.g. busybodies who are too fussy about what they expect from the press).

Just for the record, complaints about accuracy continue to top the poll (70 per cent), while the much publicised issue of privacy attracted only 12 per cent.

Over a quarter of complaints were made

# CHEERS!



against national dailies (5 were upheld); almost 20 per cent against Sundays (10 upheld); 18.5 per cent against regional dailies (4 upheld), and 12.8 per cent against regional weeklies (2 upheld). Only news agencies escaped without a single complaint, but then how many readers know when copy originates from an agency...

'Mine's a double'

Within weeks of the PCC's annual report, Sir David English, Chair of the industry's Code of Practice Committee (he has a page of the report extolling the virtues of its work) was complaining that the section of the Code covering payments to criminals

needs revising or revoking.

His remarks came as arrow broke over the Daily Mail (Editor in Chief, guess who?) found itself in the dock for laying out £300,000 to promote gaoled finance trade Nick Leeson's book.

Sir David admits his committee hasn't looked at the clause in three years. He recalls that it has its origins in 'some grandiose announcement of the Press Council around the time of the Ripper trial.'

Indeed it does Sir David.

He conveniently forgets that the ruling concerned payments made by the Daily Mail, among others, to relatives of the Yorkshire Ripper, Peter Sutcliffe.

At the time he described the report as "short-term, short-sighted and smug" and said it "proves yet again that the Press Council still does not really understand the concept of a free press."

Watch this space...

*The Code is to be overhauled this year, and the public are invited to say how it could be improved. Write to Sir David c/o Code of Practice Committee, Merchants House Buildings, 30 George Square, Glasgow G2 1EG. And to Lord Wakeham at the PCC, 1 Salisbury Square, London EC 4Y 8AE.*

## Rules are rules (but we can bend them)

THE Broadcasting Bill is going to allow media groups to carve out bigger and bigger slices of the UK press, radio, television and publishing and put them all together in a few organisations.

But don't worry, it's not legal for them to do it yet. Or so you would think. And what about the existing 1990 Broadcasting Act – after all that's the law isn't it, and you can't break that.

Not so on both counts. Companies are exploiting loopholes in legislation covering media ownership, and the ITC and Radio Authority should be testing the legality of a number of cases more rigorously. All sorts of phrases could be used to describe what's going on – deviousness, sharp business practices or just breaking the spirit but not the letter of the law.

Take some examples. Carlton and Granada inherited stakes in ITN when they took over Central and LWT franchises

respectively two years ago. They were given until 31 December last year to sell off the shares which took them over the 20 per cent limit placed on single ITN shareholders. Neither company did sell the shares. Instead, they were placed in a 'deadlocked' company over which, say the lawyers, nobody has control (but both Carlton and Granada continue to derive the economic benefits).

EMAP, the publishing and broadcasting concern, did much the same when it purchased radio franchises which took it over the prescribed limit. Its solution was to 'warehouse' the stations which would have taken it over the limit. Formally it doesn't 'own' them but in reality it determines how the stations are run and through the warehousing operation will ensure it reaps the considerable profits.

Granada recently purchased shares in Yorkshire-Tyne Tees which took it over the

20 per cent limit for any company which already owns two ITV licences. The 4 per cent of shares over the limit are again in a deadlocked company.

But the most prominent case involves Lord Hollick's media and financial services combine, MAI, and United News and Media, Lord Steven's newspaper and magazine empire. They have established a similar structure to allow them to proceed with the merger.

The ITC has complained but says it can't do anything about these examples of blatant rule bending. If the Broadcasting Bill is going to give the green light and allow the media companies to grow, one absolutely essential requirement is that the regulatory authority – if it is the ITC – has got to have wide powers to plug legal loopholes in the future, and sanctions to move against media corporations if they transgress them.

# THE FOURTH ESTATE

## The Silent Watchdog?

REMEMBER the famous quote by Lord Macaulay in 1828, when he made the direct connection between the press, political democracy and liberty?

Commenting on the role of the press in reporting Parliament, he said, "The gallery in which the reporters sit has become a fourth estate of the realm. The publication of the debates, a practice which seemed full of danger to the great safeguards of public liberty, is now regarded by many persons as a safeguard tantamount, and more than tantamount, to all the rest together."

The arms to Iraq affair raises serious doubts about the relevance, or accuracy, of such a comment in the late twentieth century. Indeed the lack of interest by the media in the issues surrounding the shadowy world of defence, intelligence, civil servants and ministers has been noticeable since April 1990 when the 'Iraqi supergun' was seized at Teesport.

The reasons why, apart from occasional pieces, the media failed to follow the story after the seizure of the pipes, and the arrest of businessmen from companies like Ordtec and Matrix Churchill, are obviously speculative. Alain Cass, who worked for the Financial Times, did work on a resource sharing link with ABC, the US television network, to investigate the arming of Iraq on both sides of the Atlantic. However, the paper closed down the investigation, and criticisms were made of the project's expense. Alain Cass commented, "In Britain, the highest form of journalism is the columnist. Investigative reporters seem to occupy a lower place."

Of course it's a complex story, and many of the facts difficult to dig out, but it could be argued convincingly that it wasn't the job of the Scott inquiry, appointed the day after the collapse of the Matrix Churchill trial in November 1992, to ferret for the information.

Even then, during the three years of the inquiry, which gave unprecedented access to Government papers and witnesses, Sir

Richard Scott's hearings were poorly attended by journalists from the national papers.

Few newspapers or broadcasting organisations, with the exception of the BBC's Graham McLagan, Channel 4 News and The Guardian, found the resources, or took the editorial decision, to allocate specialist reporters to follow the public hearings.

And in the aftermath of the report's publication, many papers rapidly relegated it to the category 'yesterday's news'. It will be up to sections of the broadcast media, journalists like The Guardian's Richard Norton-Taylor, and dissident magazines to keep the issues alive.

But there is a broader explanation for this neglect. The newspaper elite of proprietors and editors, knighted and ennobled, move within the same rarefied world of ministers, top businessmen and influential fixers. Unfortunately, if the media doesn't analyse and dig away at the Scott Report then it will fade away from public memory and importance. And that would be politically convenient for the embattled Major government, and also for the media magnates who now realise that the Tories, whatever their faults, are the ones they'll back at the next election. The tarnished image of sleaze and corruption needs to be brushed away, and paying attention to Scott will only slow down the job of promoting a positive image.

The Fourth Estate has moved a long way from the role Macaulay proudly assigned it.

### THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

"We keep too many secrets. We make secrets of matters that should not be secret... there is a tendency in all organisations - Government Departments are not immune - to use secrecy for convenience if they can get away with it."

**William Waldegrave**  
February 19, 1993  
in the debate on the  
Right to Know Bill

# Iraqgate, the Scott Inquiry and our secret society

**GRANVILLE WILLIAMS** reports on an important public event organised by the investigative magazine, *Lobster*, in Leeds on 24 February. It brought together an impressive range of speakers to dissect the Scott Report, and chart the way forward.

**STEPHEN DORRIL** is clear about the importance and impact of the Scott Report: "If you read it as a whole it is absolutely devastating - not only about this particular government but about the way that government operates as a whole. It paints a picture of a secret state, that is the intelligence service and the various committees that make it up, operating as a conspiracy engaging in cover-ups all the time."

He pointed out that we still don't know how much the total cost of defence equipment sold was; the Foreign Office gave a figure of £225 million between 1980-1990, The Daily Telegraph, £400 million but the total was at least £1 billion, and probably much more.

A crucial gap in the report was that there was nothing on the financing of the arms deals, but without the banks none of this could have taken place: "Scott would have got more of the story if he had looked at the trail of money, where it came from and where it went to."

He asserted that all the High Street banks were involved (except the Co-op) and that the issue of where the arms ended up was never raised. Other banks involved included the Italian BNL and the collapsed BCCI, and manufacturers dealing with Iran and Iraq were treated extremely favourably in obtaining credit.

A Freedom of Information Act was vital for reform and change, but the key question would be the definition of national security in it, because much of the information on arms sales would still not be available if a UK FoI Act used the US definition, he argued.

The problem with the Scott Inquiry was that it wasn't an investigation, but only dealt with the case through documents and interviews. Reformed Select Committees, with finances, researchers and a proper investigative role were needed. They also had to be independent from



Derek Fatchett MP front bench spokesperson on foreign affairs



Stephen Dorril, editor of *Lobster* and author of *The Silent Conspiracy*



Gerald James, former Chairman, Astra Holdings, and author of *In the Public Interest*

government influence or control. Finally, the urgent need for more open accountability of the intelligence services was crucial. "We need a Select Committee to look after them, and to have some control over them through overseeing their budgets," he said.

"We need to inject an urgency into our efforts to end the culture of secrecy," said **DEREK FATCHETT** MP, boldly asserting that "the efforts of a late 1990s Labour government could be as much of a solid legacy for future generations as the welfare state was with the Atlee Government."

For him the Scott Report "is more than a criticism of the individual actions of certain ministers. It is a living, breathing testament to the culture of secrecy that exists in Britain." It was the duty of government to set the parameters within which the arms trade was carried out, and Parliament had to ensure the parameters remained true. To do this he said Labour had established a clear set of principles on which arms sales should be based.

"We will not sell or supply weapons to regimes that would use them for repressive purposes or to threaten or invade neighbouring countries. Nor would we sell or supply weapons in circumstances where this would clearly intensify or prolong existing armed conflicts, worsen human rights abuses or divert scarce resources within poor countries," he said. "Consistency, openness and democracy -

these are the principles which underpin Labour's definition of the national interest."

Asking whether such ideals would melt in the heat of office, he asserted Labour's commitment to a Freedom of Information Act would reduce the risk of this happening. "A Freedom of Information Act would not put the arms industry out of business, as the experience in the United States shows. What it would do is make it easier for Parliament and the public to hold the executive to account over its handling of the arms trade," he said.

Ministers didn't tell Parliament about the change in the guidelines, and felt they had nothing to fear from Members of Parliament, and had it not been for the collapse of the Matrix Churchill trial, they would have been right. "It was only when an outside authority - in this case the courts exercised its power to demand the release of information that the game was up."

Derek Fatchett ended with a ringing call: "Labour must clean up, and open up, Whitehall."

The Scott Inquiry didn't bring the arms companies into the scope of its work, so the secretive world of the arms dealers 'merchants of death' as we have traditionally described them, so why change the habit was not opened up for analysis. It was revealing to hear an account from the inside, therefore, by **GERALD JAMES** who during the 1980s built

up a thriving business in the defence industry - "We made everything from children's sparklers, to torpedoes, bombs and shells." His rise to the centre of the arms trade followed the appointment as chairman of Astra Fireworks in 1981. His book gives an account of the clandestine ruses used to satisfy the voracious appetite for arms in the Iran-Iraq War, and the shadowy world of deals and commissions which were enormously profitable for the group of arms dealers.

For example, he dined at The Parlour, a secret club whose purpose is to introduce politicians and businessmen to intelligence chiefs; he was an honorary member of the 'Savoy Mafia', a group of arms manufacturers and dealers who met in the Savoy suite of Alan Curtis, a close friend of Denis Thatcher, to discuss their contracts and the chances for more of them.

But it all turned sour, and the experience drastically changed Gerald James into an irritant of the defence establishment. He's now a whistleblower, someone who has exposed the cabal of arms manufacturers, civil servants and spooks who have usurped the role of elected government.

For him the Scott Inquiry and Report were disappointing: "I feel that Scott failed, perhaps deliberately, to follow up lines of enquiry, and in the case of Lady Thatcher and Geoffrey Howe questioning was curtailed," he said at the Leeds meeting.

"Scott could have struck a blow for open government, but it was an opportunity missed. The report lacks clarity, the language is poor, there are too many double negatives and its conclusions not summarised clearly," he continued.

Pointing out he had first hand information and first hand experience of the operations of the security services, he said "What disturbs me most is that I think the inquiry may have been hoodwinked by the security and intelligence services on certain matters." He pointed to examples of key documents missing, and tampering with dates by the security services, and said "We'll need to go a lot further than the Scott inquiry to get to the truth behind the affair."

# Crime, media, violence

BY RICHARD OSBORNE

THE recent arrest, and tabloid hounding, of Julia Somerville over "indecent" pictures, brought out the really seamy side of the relationship between crime and the media. At the same time we have had the West trial in Winchester, which is Britain's answer to America's great "trial of the century", otherwise known as the O.J. Simpson show. The differences between these two trials and media events reveal a great deal about the cultural forms and preoccupations of both England and America. But it reveals something else too, that the media and the law are up in arms against one another and the media is winning hands down. Crime has always been a major interest of the popular media, and the more gruesome the better, but only in the last twenty years has it become an obsession. Crime and television are the two great cultural definers of our present era and when they are combined they are a lethal force.

If all crime and crime-related programmes were suddenly taken off television, what would be left? Barrymore, Noel's House Party and endless repeats of Last of the Summer Wine, which is beginning to smell like a recycled corpse. Television is now, in fact, awash with a sea of blue; the thin blue line has become a deep pool of dark, dank and deliciously violent crime. Crimewatch, The Bill, 999, Backup, Cracker, Inspector Morse, Homicide, and lately, Police, Camera, Action! where video of lunatics driving into each other is the whole programme, are all over our screens (and radios, papers, magazines). There is every kind of crime format you can think of, and a few more are yet to come (like live executions from the good old U.S. of A.?) It's a dangerous world out there huddled around the flickering screen (if someone hasn't just nicked it, that is!)

Why is crime all over the media, and why do the media never seem to be able to get enough of it? Particularly if it is celebrity crime, or even better, serial murderers. Well, we could start with the fact that crime is incredibly exciting, threatening, horrifying, fascinating and repellent all at once, or, in other words, it makes bloody good television. Mind you, if you've seen lots of repeats of Kojak you'd have to modify that statement. Crime and its solution is the perfect story for television because you can show sex, violence and perversion and then wrap it up in a neat ending which reassures the viewer that everything is OK. Or at least that used to be the theory. In fact, for a good laugh, if you watch PC. Dixon of Dock Green ('50s/'60s) when he sorts out all the

plebs, and then smirks at the camera and says goodnight, you can see what planet television used to be beamed from.

Nowadays crime has become a seriously nasty business and the media likes it even more, and this is where the trouble begins with the law. The media wants a big slice of the action when it comes to real-life crime, and that means money, fame, news-doctoring and media trials in which the plodding business of the court gets swamped by the video in the corner. It is no illusion to say that the O.J. Simpson trial was one in which the American legal system was also in the dock. O.J. got off but the jury is still out on the legal system. Live court TV is a fascinating phenomenon, and, of course, the O.J. trial instantly became a giant soap opera – compulsive, repetitive, full of characters you could identify with, and all with the bonus that it was true! Whatever that means in a television age. The film of the book of the video replay is already out, probably with a free pair of gloves thrown in, and tie-in (or should it be up?) clothes, shoes, cars and self-defence manuals endorsed by the Juice himself. We're waiting for the Bronco ad that runs "make a getaway from the city in a car of your dreams".

The O.J. case was clearly as much about stardom as it was about race, because stars belong to a different race altogether as everybody knows. A media star actually lives, and clearly can only be tried by, different rules to the rest of us, and this is where the real problem with crime, the courts and the media really begins. Perhaps the main function of the courts these days is to provide the media with verified stories about peculiar goings on. The West trial lumbers along with its endless gruesome detail of dismemberment, sexual perversion and nastiness and we are all fascinated because it carries that deadly frisson of truth. It could be you! This is Silence of the Lambs in suburbia. What more could the English ask for? It's a horror movie dressed up as a trial.

But like other recent trials the media have been interfering in a manner that clearly impacts on the way the justice is done, or more importantly, not done. Witnesses have become bit-part actors in docu-dramas that can be sold to various media for quite tidy sums of money, and it's all legal – just. Getting to witnesses totally undermines the courts and the media do it twenty four hours a day. Television dominates the way people think about crime because crime is the staple diet of television. Being a witness can now mean getting on television, or getting in the paper, or even writing a book, as everyone in

the O.J. Simpson trial was doing, including the guy who ran the court-room toilets. The media have elevated crime into an art-form, the art of forming people's opinions about who did what to whom. It may be entertaining but it probably isn't justice!

Julia Somerville has probably got something to say about the relationship between crime reporting, sensationalism and the media's appetite for sleaze, but being in the media she can't rock the frame. The police have joined in a swell. They don't want men on the beat, they want nice-looking PCs on the box, alternately scaring and reassuring the viewer that they have the public's well-being at heart. Everyone is dragged into a vortex of real and imagined crime in which the stories are much more important than the facts, and the viewers sit barricaded behind their settees armed with a chisel and a pit-bull, waiting for the next lunatic to knock on the door. (When they do come, it's a Tory canvasser calling for more prisons to be built.) Crimewatch is horrifying, as are all the documentaries about "Yardies", "crack-dealers", the "Triads" and now the "Russian Mafia". The trouble is, we could say, that it is all just a little bit totally exaggerated. Of course there is crime, and lots of it, but most of it is incredibly boring, routine, depressing and distinctly unentertaining. Having your car seat slashed and knobs pulled off your radio isn't like On The Bill, but it's more like what happens in what we used to call "real life". That's why the media portrayals of crime win all the time – they're dead sexy, violent, fast, threatening or curious, complicated, enigmatic and fascinating like in Inspector Morse – they're never achingly dull and tacky.

Basically media portrayals of crime lock everyone into a repetitive hysteria that they can't shake off. The fascination comes from fear that it could be you, and watching it distances and reinforces that fear all at once. We live in an age of insecurity and incoherence where the limits of the "normal" are all over the place. Crime reporting titillates that insecurity and reinforces the incoherence. Jolly old Cracker sorts it out and explains everything. There's only one drawback – it's complete rubbish. The verdict in the O.J. trial had nothing to do with the evidence, nor will the Rosemary West trial, but it had a lot to do with what the media say about crime. Crime does pay, and the media are the ones with the money and the motive.

Richard Osborne is the co-editor of *Crime and the Media: The Post-modern Spectacle*. Pluto Press £12.95 paperback. ISBN 07453 09119

# Digital doubts

ONE OF my first real assignments as a new BBC engineer, 20-odd years ago, was connecting the "country cameras" at Newbury racecourse with an outside broadcast vehicle miles away behind the main grandstand.

"Just like working for the Post Office," I remember thinking. "It's all block terminals and twisted pairs." Behind the scenes, live television has always been more about sound than pictures, a maxim that is still true today.

However, plenty has changed over two decades, and anyone lucky enough to pick up a job in radio or television these days is joining a radically different industry.

No longer are broadcasting and telecommunications separated neatly by long lengths of copper cable. The twain have finally met, and technological change is forging two new industries:

- the hardware sector, providing and operating global networks; and
- the software side, creating the entertainment and information software which rides on the digital infrastructure.

Government has begun to address some of the issues raised by the convergence of the two industries with a new Broadcasting Bill, currently passing through Parliament.

The well-reported furore over satellite TV's growing monopoly of sporting events – an important issue for the future of public service broadcasting – has obscured the more important proposals for ownership of the media, and the introduction of digital terrestrial TV and radio.

The Bill does nothing to reverse the trend towards fewer companies owning more and more media outlets. In fact, it relaxes many of the existing limits on newspapers owning broadcasters and vice versa.

This heralds further waves of job-cutting mergers, particularly in ITV, and will add to the growth of unaccountable trans-national publishing and media companies where profit comes first, and editorial or artistic standards come a poor second.

Quality of programming is scarcely mentioned in the Bill, marking a change from previous broadcasting laws where the question of content and regulation has always been the subject of lengthy clauses and passionate debate.

The Government's approach to digital technology in broadcasting has been more encouraging.

**TONY LENNON** Chair of CPBF and President of the Broadcasting, Entertainment Cinematograph and Theatre Union argues that government needs to look at the implications of the convergence of broadcasting and telcoms technology for owners and consumers. And he regrets the new Broadcasting Bill fails on all fronts

Part of the UHF spectrum is to be used for digital terrestrial television and radio transmission, with space guaranteed for existing public service broadcasters, including the BBC, ITV, and Channel 4.

Unions and broadcasters alike have welcomed this part of the proposals, since it maintains the transmission of some programmes in the new medium whose standards will still be subject to a degree of positive public regulation.

However, in keeping with Tory philosophy, no public money is available to develop the new digital broadcasting infrastructure (although the BBC will probably re-equip itself with digital production facilities on the proceeds from privatisation of its transmitter chain).

Consequently, there are widespread doubts that the land-based digital system, with a potential of 30-40 channels, will raise cash quickly enough to start operation before Rupert Murdoch's BSkyB rolls out a satellite-based alternative offering ten times more channels.

A head start for Murdoch could mean that he ends up owning the dominant hardware platform for delivery of broadcast TV programmes in the UK.

The Government's terrestrial system, if launched late, may simply limp along for a while, desperately trying to encourage viewers to pay for expensive new equipment in order to see the same old programmes.

When the existing non-digital TV transmitters are switched off in the future (don't forget – that spectrum is worth money to the Government if rented out for telecoms use), the regulated public service broad-

casters may be stuck to find a home.

Unless, of course, Murdoch has been smart enough meanwhile to offer them a cut-price, or even free, ride on his digital satellite.

To anyone watching from a telecommunications perspective, it may seem strange that such energy is put into the planning of a uni-directional broadcasting system.

After all, we are on the verge of an interactive age which needs more than a one-way connection, and the vague plans to offer some interactivity by using PSTN lines for the "back circuit" to digital broadcasters are hardly elegant.

Given a blank sheet of paper, most planners would probably start with the broadband fibre optic network that the communications unions have pushed for over the last decade.

However, we have inherited a vast legacy, consisting of hardware like transmitter sites and cable TV installations, and a software mountain built on back catalogues of



programmes which were all made according to public service values.

Hanging on to those values is crucially important to everyone with a stake in our broadcasting industry, whether they are providers or viewers.

The future for broadcasting and telecommunications is unpredictable, except for one thing: the current Broadcasting Bill could well be the last piece of legislation that covers one industry without including the other.

Trade unionists in both industries, and in all developed countries, will have to come to terms with the fact that, ultimately, they are all working in the same business.

**MEDIA MANIFESTO UPDATE**

AS REPORTED in Free Press (Jan-Feb 1996), the CPBF is producing a new Media Manifesto. The Manifesto is designed to generate widespread debate on media policies in the run up to the next General Election. It will set out a clearly argued case for democracy, diversity, accountability and public service obligations across the mass media. The Manifesto will set out principles upon which the media policies of the main parties can be judged and workable proposals which will form the basis for lobbying and campaigning in the lead up to the Election. Our overall aim is to mobilise a broad coalition of support to ensure that the next Government's media policy is shaped by public interests, not by powerful commercial interests or political expediency.

On 12 February we held a lively and rewarding public meeting to discuss topics and policy for the Manifesto. Thanks to all those who took part. Already, we have had a huge response from organisations and individuals offering ideas and comments on our draft proposals. As a result, we have decided to extend the period for consultation. The Manifesto will now be produced in April. It will be launched at our May conference and promoted extensively throughout the year.

**MEDIA AND DEMOCRACY – THE REAL SHARE ISSUE**

ON SATURDAY 18th May we are hosting a major conference at TUC Congress Centre in London. The conference is an important opportunity to promote the Media Manifesto. It's a chance to discuss how the CPBF, together with our partner organisa-

**CAMPAIGN REPORTS**

tions and supporters, can increase popular support for media democracy and influence politicians and policy-makers in the lead up to the next Election.

There will be key debates and a choice of sessions on topics including: the Information Superhighway; European media policy and trade union action; Media Concentration; Politics, the media and the next Election; Proprietorial power and



**BECTU President Tony Lennon will speak at our major conference on May 18**

Journalists' rights; Freedom of Information; and proposals for media reform.

Speakers include: Carole Tongue MEP, Aidan White (International Federation of Journalists), Tony Lennon (BECTU), James Curran (Goldsmith's College), Maurice Frankel (Campaign for Freedom of Information) Bob Franklin (author of Packaging Politics), Gary Herman (Labour Telematics Centre).

We are inviting international guest speakers as well as senior politicians, trade unionists and media figures to make contributions. Full details of the programme and a publicity leaflet will be available from 18 March.

The conference is being organised with the support of trade unions including the National Union of Journalists, BECTU, GPMU, Communications Workers Union, Writers' Guild, Equity, Society of Telecom Executives, and UNISON as well as the National Campaign for the Arts and International Federation of Journalists.

Last year's conference Media versus the People was a great success. This year we want to encourage real debate and action by bringing together media professionals, trade unionists, campaigners, students and academics and as many CPBF members as possible.

Conference fees are  
 £15 (waged)  
 £25 (delegate rate)  
 £70 (commercial/statutory)  
 £5 (unwaged)

**GET CONNECTED!**

ALL CPBF members and subscribers will automatically receive a copy of the Media Manifesto. Please contact the national office if you want to see a copy of our draft proposals for comments. Better still, send us a stamped addressed envelope.

Our conference leaflet will be available from 18 March and sent to all members. We want to bring people together from across the country, so please let us know if you can help in any way to publicise the conference locally. For more details call 0171 278 4430 or fax us on 0171 837 8868.

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