

FREE Press

No. 97, March-April 1997

50p Journal of the Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom

● SUNSPOTS ●

A change in the political climate

JOHN MAJOR'S May 1 election announcement has put our media monitoring work into top gear. We've already responded to requests for interviews and over the coming weeks we will be surveying media coverage, highlighting bias, and publicising our research findings on media coverage of the election as widely as possible.

Free Press went to press before the first full week of election coverage was complete but some startling and significant contrasts are emerging in the way key sections of the press are covering this election, compared with 1992.

The first and obvious difference is the dramatic news in the Sun on March 18: THE SUN BACKS BLAIR. The media became the general election topic as columnists pondered the significance of this radical realignment, and broadcast news programmes joined in too. It's an unlikely partnership but Andrew Neil provides an explanation for it. In his memoir, Full Disclosure, he writes, "By the end of 1995 Rupert's editors were in little doubt that Blair was his man. But as 1996 progressed the signals became more blurred. Blair was still popular with Rupert but he started getting cold feet at the prospect of a Labour government, particularly as its pro-European stance became apparent."

Well, it seems Rupert has been reassured. He decided (no editorial independence for Sun editor Stuart Higgins) about four weeks before the Sun announcement that the paper would ditch the Tories and support Blair. On the day before the Sun announcement it ran an 'Exclusive' - 'Blair takes hard new line on EU' and in a column headlined 'I'm a British patriot' he wrote 'New Labour will have no truck with a European superstate. We will fight for

Britain's interests and to keep our independence every inch of the way.'

The Sun commented approvingly, 'His pledges will reassure voters that New Labour still has strong reservations about a totally pro-European policy.'

This new-found support for New Labour will have an electoral significance. In key marginal seats like Basildon up to 50 per cent of households are Sun readers, and you only need to peel away 5 per cent of Tory supporters to have an impact. But



something else has been happening. At the time of the 1992 general election nine daily and Sunday papers had a majority of readers who voted Conservative. In the years since that support has oozed away.

MORI has tracked the political views of newspaper readers between 1992 up to the end of 1996 by doing 70,000 interviews. Only four newspapers now have a majority of readers who say they support the Tories - The Daily Telegraph, The Sunday Telegraph, The Express and The Express on Sunday - whilst big switches in party support have occurred among previously strongly pro-Tory papers.

In 1992 45 per cent of Sun readers voted Conservative, 36 per cent Labour and 15 per cent LibDem. Voting intentions at the end of 1996 were Conservative 25 per cent, Labour 60 per cent and Lib Dem 10 per cent. This was before the page 1 pro-Blair shift, so it will presumably open the gap further.

But it's also significant how other newspapers which were avowedly pro-Conservative in 1992 were tepid in their initial political coverage of the election. The Mail seemed more concerned to promote moral outrage around the film Crash rather than fall in firmly behind John Major. However there were signs of some of the uglier aspects which the Mail featured in 1992 re-surfacing this time round.

'Tories put migrants on election agenda' was the headline of a substantial spread on March 19 announcing 'Tory MPs agreed last night to make immigration - until now almost a taboo subject in British politics - an issue in the election campaign.' It gave prominence to the fact that Nicholas Budgen and the West Midlands group of about 30 Tory MPs are going to make this a top campaigning issue.

ELECTIONWATCH '97 will give us an invaluable overview of how the media covered this crucial election. If you want to be involved this is what you can do.

ELECTIONWATCH '97 Copies of the Electionwatch Media Monitoring form are available from the CPBF National Office. It's straightforward and you can use it to monitor the media for bias, and track which policies get coverage or disappear during the election. Send SAE to CPBF National Office for your form.

ELECTIONWATCH '97 If you have information, want us to do interviews, or help Electionwatch in any way there's an **Electionwatch Phone Line** TEL 041 098 0600 or contact CPBF National 0171 278 4430 and CPBF North 01484 454184.

MURDERERS!

Why the Mail was wrong

ASTONISHMENT greeted the Daily Mail front page on St Valentine's Day, which carried colour pictures of five named white men under the banner 'MURDERERS'. The Mail accuses these men of killing. If we are wrong, let them sue us'.

The Mail's account of who stabbed to death Black teenager Stephen Lawrence at a South London bus stop in April 1993 was run across two inside pages, and backed by an editorial.

It brought jubilation to Black people in Britain unused to such unequivocal support from the mainstream press, especially a paper that once backed Hitler and runs cowardly campaigns against refugees and asylum seekers.

The rest of the media was thrown into a spin by the Mail's audacity. The Guardian and the Daily Telegraph had come almost as close, by identifying the men and reporting prominently the forthright condemnation of Coroner Sir Montague Levine.

Their caution was well-judged, and the Mail was wrong to do what it did.

Its justification came in the second paragraph of the front page: '... police are sure (they) are the white youths who killed black teenager Stephen Lawrence.'

How often have we heard that before – about Judith Ward, the Guildford Four, the Bridgewater Four, the Birmingham Six, the Winchester Three, not to mention Winston Silcott and his co-defendants from Broadwater Farm?

It is one thing for a newspaper to conduct its own independent investigation and lay charges at the door of a wrong-doer – quite another to simply accept the word of the police. That road leads to very rough justice indeed.

These unpleasant young men have not been convicted in a court, still face possible civil charges, and chose to remain silent at the inquest – a civil liberty which the police, some MPs and some newspapers believe implies guilt.

The Mail was quick to run stills from an under-cover police video, also shown on TV, in which three of the men displayed violent, racist behaviour. Was this commercial exploitation of police videos, an indication of why the police should be allowed to bug and burgle at will, or the earnest pursuit of justice and truth?

The Mail's belligerent stance also showed up the failings of the 1996 Defamation Act, which is supposed to make it easier for ordinary people to sue when an obvious libel is committed.

Under the new 'fast track' procedure the plaintiff can ask a judge to authorise a swift settlement, with a limit set on the damages awarded. But it requires the consent of both parties.

A commercial publisher with unlimited cash can stonewall, and insist on a full trial. There is still no legal aid for libel challenges, so few individuals can afford to go that far.

The Mail was well aware that none of the five has the means to sue – so it was safe to make a hollow gesture of support for the Lawrence family.

The real scandal about the murder of Stephen Lawrence is the racism in British society which has protected his killers and which treats the death and injury of Black people, on the streets, in their homes, and in police custody as commonplace.

It is refreshing to see the mainstream press take up cudgels on behalf of Black people, but how rare it is – remember how they turned on those (Black people) who protested about police inaction after the Deptford fire?

If the Mail is innocent of the charge of cynical headline-grabbing (how many extra copies did it sell for days afterwards?) let's see what it does when Tory politicians 'play the race card' during the General Election campaign.

CPBF National Council member, Mike Jempson
(Executive Director, PressWise)

Without Comment

THE considerable audience share of the BBC's publicly-funded channels is one of the main justifications for a universal licence fee. Another is that viewers cannot currently be charged according to how much use they make of the BBC because it is impossible to tell who is watching what. With digital television this will be possible. Those who only watch ITV's "Coronation Street" (financed entirely by advertising) rather than the BBC's "Eastenders" will have more reason to ask why they are subsidising other people's entertainment.

If digital television takes off, and especially if loyalty to the established channels breaks down, the case for abandoning the licence fee and financing the BBC by subscription will be much stronger. Has this occurred to the BBC's bosses?

The Economist, March 15 1997

BLAIR should enjoy his honeymoon with Murdoch. It is unlikely to last long. The marriage would not have happened if Murdoch were not sure Blair was almost certain to win anyway: his endorsement is the product of hard-headed, commercial consideration rather than political affinity. And Murdoch is promiscuous when it comes to political support.

In Australia and America, he has a track record of embracing politicians who can further his business interests, then dumping them when they've served their purpose. If Prime Minister Blair deviates from his pro-market promises or kowtows too much to Brussels, Murdoch will soon enough face the full wrath of the Murdoch Press.

If, in opposition, the Tories pick a Thatcherite like Michael Portillo as their new leader then Murdoch will be even more inclined to jump the New Labour ship. And by then a weakened Labour government may be too feeble to seek revenge on his media interests.

Andrew Neil

Daily Mail, March 1997

Even if there has been no trading of policies, Murdoch will be reassured by Blair's attitude to his expanding media empire. No legislation will be introduced to curb his activities, merely a request for responsible behaviour. 'It's not a question of Murdoch being too powerful. He's got a strong position and whatever authority or power he has needs to be exercised responsibly. I would like to see a situation where that happens not by legislation, but that people get a fair crack of the whip in the media.'

Tony Blair

interview in New Statesman, 21 March 1997

Wily Rupert is a safe bet

TONY LENNON

THE RACE to dominate TV broadcasting in Britain is coming to a close.

Murdoch's horse was a satellite digital system, up against only one other runner, Digital Terrestrial TV whose rider is about to be chosen.

When the Independent Television Commission announced the runners bidding for airspace on the new land-based digital TV system, Rupert Murdoch turned out to be the surprise guest in the owners' paddock. After months of knocking the system known as Digital Terrestrial Television (DTT), BSKyB surfaced as a major partner in one of only two bids to run TV services from next year.

British Digital Broadcasting, the bid backed by BSKyB, also includes Carlton and Granada, both of whom are already major players in the existing analogue (non-digital) ITV system. Like the opposing bidder, the CableTel backed Digital Television Network CableTel, the BSKyB consortium has pitched for all available airspace on the three blocks of broadcasting spectrum which the ITC had on offer.

This move puts the ITC into a double bind: any choice they make will inevitably increase the influence of either the existing ITV and satellite sector, or the cable TV sector, and both bids imply that all of the airspace has to be handed over to just one operator. The original hope was that a wide selection of operators would come forward with proposals to operate individual "multiplexes", the transmitters which will bundle up to six TV channels into one frequency.

Three of the six available multiplexes had already been promised firstly to the BBC, secondly to ITV and Channel 4, and lastly to Channel 5 and S4C, all of whom plan using the extra capacity offered by the digital system to introduce new channels, some of them funded by subscription. The lack of interest in the remaining three digital multiplexes, ironically due to negative comments from many industry players including BSKyB, led to only two bids, giving the ITC little choice. Whichever of the two bids it selects, the result will be a further increase in monopoly control over the audio-visual distribution sector which now comprises cable, satellite, land-based, and electronic on-line systems.

Little help is provided by the criteria

which govern the ITC's decision. The 1996 Broadcasting Act says that the appeal of bidders "to a variety of tastes and interests" should guide the ITC's deliberations, along with operators' plans to provide viewers with set-top boxes, and programme providers with fair access to transmission slots. Topless darts anyone?

Most commentators, after being knocked backwards by Murdoch's blessing for the BDB bid, quickly recovered their composure and awarded him the winner's rosette. Despite the vagueness of the ITC's criteria, it's easy to see why the BDB consortium is being hotly tipped. Apart from the strength of programming on offer from Carlton,

Granada, and BSKyB, the bid is underpinned by an exclusive offer of up to eight new channels originated by the BBC. This endorsement from the nation's largest public broadcaster is as good for BDB as the words "by Royal appointment" are for manufacturers of tiaras. The BBC knows as much about TV programming as HRH knows about expensive headgear.

The opposing bidders, DTN, have expressed hopes that they would be able to strike a deal with the BBC to transmit the new channels if the BSKyB bid loses, but even if events turn out that way, it is alarming that the publicly-funded BBC is helping to pick a winner in a privately financed and profit-led contest.

Murdoch's reasons for joining the contest probably have a lot to do with his ownership of the encryption and conditional access technology that will be used by the digital satellite TV system due to launch this August. By the way, just in case you didn't know, this is called BSKyB, and is also owned, in part, by Murdoch.

If the Carlton/Granada/BSkyB bid wins a licence for all the available digital TV multiplexes, it looks almost inevitable that BDB, and in consequence the public-service broadcasters who will operate the other three digital multiplexes, will settle on the BSKyB smartcard and coding technology as a common standard. For viewers this promises easy access, through the same set-

top box, to all digital services on terrestrial TV, as well as Murdoch's satellite programmes if they are willing to pay a subscription. It looks likely that they will also be able to connect to digital cable services now that the cable TV industry has decided to adopt parts of the Murdoch coding system as their technical standard.

For Murdoch it means a healthy income from the licence payments that fellow broadcasters will have to make for use of the coding technology, and control over every broadcaster's ability to send their signal out, should he ever dare to use this power.

No-one broadcasting on the Digital Terrestrial platform will be obliged to use the associated services like subscriber management and access authorisation, already operated by BSKyB, that are necessary to reach viewers on the digital system. However if BSKyB is already running a service that you need to use, why re-invent the wheel?

All in all, our old friend Rupert could be well positioned by the time the new digital TV market consolidates. If BDB wins a three-multiplexer licence, the companies behind the consortium will jointly control half our land-based digital TV system, all our satellite TV, a significant proportion of ITV, and a third of our national press.

No wonder the regulators, denied any framework which seriously limits concentration of ownership, work feverishly to produce a plethora of small demands. Like

Lilliputians they have to hope that, although the threads of regulation are thin and fragile, applying enough of them will eventually bind Gulliver down.

Gamblers, being more cynical, might be tempted to put their money on the chances of the giant breaking free, which seems a more likely outcome given the long history of News International deftly dodging regulatory handcuffs time after time.

As horse races go, the great contest between Digital Satellite and Digital Terrestrial has been an interesting run so far. It began with the two joint favourites emerging from the starting gates neck and neck, each determined to win.

It looks set to finish with one of the owners ensuring that both nags cross the line at the same time, while quietly taking out a stake in the other gee-gee just to make sure.

Most commentators quickly recovered their composure and awarded him the rosette

Our old friend Rupert could be well positioned by the time the new digital TV market consolidates

There's a logic to Labour's policy switches on the media – you could call it the Pandora's Box theory of media regulation

MISGUIDED AND DANGEROUS

TOM O'MALLEY
DURING the 1980s the Labour party was openly critical of media concentration and the growing commercialisation of public service broadcasting. It was critical of the expanding power of cross media conglomerates, such as Murdoch's News International and of Tory attempts to put advertising on the BBC. It argued in favour of a statutory Right of Reply and for tighter controls on cross media ownership.

After the election defeat in 1992 Neil Kinnock attributed Labour's failure, in part, to the influence of the Tory press.

In the summer of 1995 the national press was covered with photos of the new, fresh, and, of course, very modern Tony Blair, shaking hands with that representative of old style global capitalism, Rupert Murdoch. This signaled that the Blair leadership had reversed its positions on media concentration and the commercialisation of the broadcast media.

No longer the condemnation of concentrated media power, now the warm smiles of accommodation. No longer the critique of biased proprietors, now the ingratiating handshake.

Neil Kinnock's Labour party articulated a long standing Labour critique of media ownership. In 1947 the Labour government set up a Royal Commission on the press, in part because of widespread concerns about media ownership. Labour has always supported provisions in broadcasting legislation such as the 1972 Sound Broadcasting Act, the 1981 and the 1990 Broadcasting Acts, to keep controls on cross media ownership.

A succession of post-war inquiries into the media, the Beveridge Committee, the Pilkington Committee the second and third Royal Commissions on the Press and the Annan Committee, in different ways reflected a consensus that cross media ownership between the press and broadcasting needed to be limited, and that broadcasting should be driven not by profit but by the goal of public service.

But times change. Labour theoreticians have accepted the view that successive electoral defeats in the 1980s and in 1992 have been because the party has been too old fashioned.

Old fashioned in its critique of the inequalities that flow from the activities of under regulated capitalism. Old fashioned in its view that party democracy should be based on people's participation in debate at trade union and CLP meetings. Old fashioned in its commitment to using tax as tool to redistribute wealth in our society. Old fashioned in

its belief that the poor can only gain full civil rights if they are relieved of the nagging fear of poverty, homelessness, deprivation and unemployment and that public spending is the key to that relief. And old fashioned in its belief that the mass media should be regulated to curb abuses of power and to ensure that they are instruments of enlightenment and liberty.

In one sense the Labour leadership is doing something new. It is acting on its beliefs about the power of the media. When in office though it did little to act on its belief in the power of the media to influence public opinion, except to set up three post war Royal Commissions on the Press. Now, in opposition, it is acting on its

belief in media power with a vengeance. It is paying homage to media power, instead of challenging it.

Instead of considering how to build on the policy work done by Labour Shadow spokespersons on the media between the 1970s and the early '90s, New Labour is acting as if all that hadn't happened.

It is trying to win the support of the right wing media by promising to be more capitalist than the Conservatives. This amounts to agreeing that the big businesses that run the UK media should become even bigger.

Arguments that there should be more, not less control, have been dismissed as old fashioned and irrelevant. Now, modern, New Labour has a new approach to media ownership.

Labour has now pledged its support for the expansion of commercial media and the relaxation of controls on ownership. Its front bench spokespersons called for fewer restraints on media cross ownership during debates about the 1996 Broadcasting Bill. This would have benefited Murdoch and the Mirror group. Labour has remained virtually silent on the debate over Murdoch's potential control of the digital decoding sector of the industry. On 18 of March 1997 the Sun delivered the pay-off for this subservience by pledging editorial support for New Labour. It is not, as the editorial makes

clear, the conservative right wing Sun or its proprietor that has changed since 1992. It is Labour that has made all the concessions.

Also there is a logic to all of this, which could be called the Pandora's Box theory of media regulation. Once a process of commercialisation is set in train, it is hard to stop. Take the case of the BBC in the last ten years.

The Government is, with Labour support, encouraging the BBC to become more commercial in its structure and operations. In the 1980s the Tories restructured the BBC by engineering the imposition of market orientated managers led by John Birt. In 1993 Birt introduced an internal market into the BBC –

Producer Choice. This exposed the BBC to market pressures and produced demoralisation and job losses. One area, now BBC Resources, has lost around 5,000 jobs in the last four years. ('In the public interest' Guardian 17.3.97).

From April 1997 the BBC will be split into six stand-alone divisions which divorce programme making from broadcasting. The purpose of this split is to further intensify market pressures and practices within the organisation. Part of this reorientation towards the market has involved allowing the BBC to get more

involved in commercial digital TV.

An article in The Economist recently pointed out that the licence fee is, in part justified by the large audience share of BBC 1 and 2, and by the difficulties involved in directly charging. The BBC's planned involvement in a deal with the American provider of cable and satellite, Flextech, will involve generating significant income from directly charging its audiences.

This might have serious consequences: 'If digital television takes off, and especially if loyalty to the established channels breaks down, the case for abandoning the licence fee and financing the BBC by subscription will be much stronger. Has this occurred to the BBC's bosses?' Media commentator Maggie Brown's

criticism last month of the implications of the strategy being pursued by Birt's team echoes arguments made by the Campaign since the 1980s: 'What seems certain is that the BBC they are fashioning will be far easier to privatise, in parts, than a single entity. It may be that, not consciously, the BBC is becoming involved in an almost inevitable drift towards privatisation. The momentum these changes build up will almost impossible to stop'. ('In the public interest', Guardian 17.3.97)

The suggestion that BBC bosses are not fully conscious of the drift towards privatisation is doing them an injustice. But are Labour leaders conscious of the general implications of their current policies? If not, they would do well to look to the recent history of the BBC, for just as the logic of embracing the market in the 1980s is bringing the BBC to the brink of privatisation in the 1990s, so the Labour leadership's current policy on ownership and their timidity and subservience in the face of the media proprietors in 1997 will bear bitter fruit as the old century gives way to the new.

Currently the Labour leadership believes that you can allow ownership to be under-regulated, but regulate other things – market access, universal service and, in some cases, balance. This, however, assumes that regulation will be allowed to work by the big media once Labour has been elected. But, if New Labour in government tries to do anything that seems to threaten the economic and political interests of the owners it has courted in opposition, then its new-found friends will act in accordance with good, old fashioned self-interest. They will mobilise their formidable resources to attack and undermine the Labour government.

By signaling so early that it intends to do nothing about media ownership, then Labour can do nothing. It will be faced with the growth of a greater concentration of media power during its term in office, one to which it will have to pay even greater homage as a fresh general election approaches. The leadership has locked itself into a subservient posture to the media proprietors, something which no other Labour opposition has done before.

The current Labour leadership's approach to media ownership is misguided and dangerous.

There are a raft of policies which could be pursued to make the media more accessible and accountable at national and international level. It will be up to the Labour, trade union and community movements to argue fiercely for this during the election campaign, and, equally as importantly, after ... if Labour wins.



The campaign's new Election Watch '97 postcard – on sale now, see back page



Lewis Moonie MP, front bench media spokesperson says Labour will guarantee freedom of information. But curbs on media ownership will go

A golden age, with opportunities for all

THIS SHOULD BE a golden age for journalists with a wide range of opportunities in multimedia publishing and digital broadcasting. However, any encouragement from government must be matched by a framework of rights for media industry workers.

Labour has made a commitment to sign the European Social Charter and accept the Working Time Directive. We also guarantee the right of employees to be represented by a trade union and for that union to be recognised where it enjoys majority support. Some National Union of Journalists members – in local newspapers – may also benefit from Labour's proposals for a national minimum wage.

The NUJ – as demonstrated by Bill Goodwin's and Dave Wilson's cases – has been in the forefront of legal challenges to uphold employees' rights. We do not believe it should be necessary to have to go to the European Court to protect journalistic freedom, hence our commitment to incorporate the European Convention into British law and for trade unionists to be entitled not to be discriminated against by employers.

We will also be looking carefully at the expected House of Lords decision on the period of time before employees enjoy full employment rights.

The media debate over the past 18 months has been dominated by the introduction of digital broadcasting and changes in ownership rules for television and radio. Historically Labour opposed cross-media ownership. We changed that stance because we recognised the rapidly

evolving nature of the media industries. We should not hold that process back but we must prevent the growth of monopolies or anti-competitive behaviour. Cross-media ownership limits – whether for television or radio – should be determined principally through the application of strong public interest tests.

We want to see a series of regulatory reforms in broadcasting. The telecommunications regulator, OFTEL, should be remodelled as an OFCOM. Future media legislation and regulation should allow flexibility and ensure that technological and market changes can be responded to quickly.

The need for the regulators to be sure of their powers and be able to act at speed is aptly demonstrated by the digital "set-top-box" debate and the need to ensure that no gatekeeper can deny access to other broadcasters on fair and reasonable terms.

We maintain our long-held position of support for non-statutory regulation of the press; the PCC seems to be doing an adequate job at present. My own view is that we should not rush into legislation whether for these or for privacy matters, but continue to rely on an informal and consensual approach. A Freedom of Information Act would also reinforce this way of dealing with media rights.

This article first appeared in The Journalist, the magazine of the National Union of Journalists.

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TELETEXT WARS:**MAIL GROUP VS MURDOCH**

TELETEXT LTD, which runs the service on both ITV and Channel 4, is 75 per cent owned by the Daily Mail and General Trust. Around 18 million people now have the service on their sets and last year the company made profits of £8m on a turnover of £35m. A big slice of this is from the rapidly expanding travel trade advertising. (The BBC service, Ceefax, does not run ads.)

Channel 5 will have its own version of teletext and one of the bidders for this is Text5 Ltd, an offshoot of Teletext Ltd. But its bid of £313,000 is unlikely to succeed because Sky Five Text, a joint venture by Channel 5 Broadcasting and BSKyB is bidding £1.5m.

This is bad news for Sir David English, chairman of Associated Newspapers and publisher of the Mail and its sister paper, the London Evening Standard. He has used the threat of Murdoch getting a toehold in a small but valuable part of British terrestrial TV to boost the appeal of his organisation's bid, but unlike the ITV franchise auction which had a quality hurdle, money could be the deciding factor this time.

The ITC says a decision will be announced in May.

ITN AND LIVING MARXISM

THE February issue of Living Marxism had the photo taken from ITN footage in 1992 of Muslim prisoners in a transit camp at Trnopolje in Bosnia across its front cover. It showed the skeletal figure of Fikret Alic and was splashed around the world and had enormous impact at the time.

It was the picture that fooled the world, according to LM, and the magazine carried a lengthy article by a German journalist, Thomas Deichman, alleging that the image was created by 'camera angles and editing'.

ITN's response to the story was to attempt to get every copy of the February issue of the magazine pulped. LM in turn refused and has put a good deal of energy into publicising the issue.

Now ITN is suing LM for libel, and the magazine is appealing for donations to 'defend press freedom against this unprecedented attack by a media giant'. If you want further information contact LM on 0171 278 9908, or you can send a donation to BM Off The Fence, London WC1N 3XX.

RED AND GREEN LIGHTS

THE PLANS by the Daily Mail and General Trust were quite clear. Sir David English explained them last year in a speech at the Radio Academy. Banking on relaxations in the 1996 Broadcasting Act, the group, which owns the Leicester Mercury and several freesheets in the area, was planning to build up a range of media outlets, spanning cable (Channel 1) and radio in key regions where it owned newspapers.

MEDIA MONITOR

The Radio Authority (RA) has refused to wave through the acquisition of Leicester Sound, the local radio station, by DMGT. In a decision at the end of January the RA found it would operate against the public interest and result in no clear economic benefit.

However in another contradictory judgement the RA in March awarded an FM licence to the company that runs the major newspaper group in Wolverhampton.

"We're gutted and still can't believe it," said Pete Whitehouse, spokesperson for the Wolverhampton Community radio/Challenge FM, whose bid for the licence drew on 12 years' experience. Instead, the RA handed the licence to the publishers of the Express and Star.

The difference with the Leicester case is that Wolverhampton was a new licence while Leicester was a proposed takeover. But for disappointed supporters of Challenge FM, the distinction is academic. The result is a monopoly service.

"Maybe it was a backlash of the Leicester decision," said Pete Whitehouse. "Everyone is asking 'Why?' but of course the Radio Authority doesn't tell you why you've been turned down."

Formed in 1985, Wolverhampton Community Radio was one of the pioneers of the community broadcasting in the UK. Down but not out, the group is to continue operating RSLs and running training courses.

EURO-OWNERSHIP RULES

A PLANNED directive on proposed EC media ownership is already the target of fierce opposition from UK media groups. The EC proposes that groups should be limited to holdings with no more than a 30 per cent share of the total media audience in a set 'zone'. The zone, for the purpose of the directive, would be regarded as a region for a regional broadcaster, but the whole of Europe for pan-European operations. However the proposed directive would not be retrospective, so Murdoch's UK operations would be untouched.

The Newspaper Society is determined to 'defend the gains so recently won' on cross-media ownership rules under the Broadcasting Act 1996. They say the advance draft of the EC proposal 'would be likely to prohibit regional newspapers from buying radio stations within their circulation, despite the government's recent liberalisation of the rules.'

Barry Cox, Director of the The Independent Television Association (ITVA) said: "The current proposals are very

damaging. If commissioners agree them as drafted, they will pose a serious threat to the future of regional broadcasting in the UK." Strange, that. Surely the greater threat to regional broadcasting was realised when the ITV regional franchises were snapped up by the 'Big Three' – Lord Hollick's United News and Media, Gerry Robinson's Granada and Michael Green's Carlton.

The first tentative moves to tackle issues of media concentration were first raised at a European level in 1992. Since then there's been a good deal of activity – research, questionnaires and published reports. We can expect the same kind of concerted lobbying at the EC level by UK media groups to derail this Directive as we saw around the Broadcasting Act in 1996 to jettison cross-media ownership restrictions. It's up to us to ensure that voices for diversity and pluralism in Europe are supported.

PRESS DISTRIBUTION CAMPAIGN

Anni Marjoram gives a progress report ...

THE Committee for Diversity and Pluralism has generated unprecedented activity around the seemingly dull subject of newspaper distribution. It has done this because members of the Committee understand that there is a connection between where we purchase a paper and a free and diverse press.

We started in June 1996 with an Early Day Motion in the House of Commons calling for a referral back to the Monopolies and Mergers Commission. EDMs are not earth shattering, but this one, put down in the name of Ken Livingstone MP, was a good device to flag up the issue and see what support there was. Effective campaigning by newspaper retail associations soon had MPs from all parties signing. Another EDM in late November by Rachel Squires MP also attracted support.

There have also been Parliamentary Questions asked by MPs ranging from members of the Socialist Campaign group to Ulster Unionists.

In February we launched our National Petition to the European Parliament which will be presented in April. We want to see if the practices in the distribution of newspapers in this country are contrary to European Competition law.

In many European countries the right to distribute a daily newspaper is enshrined in law. We are campaigning for such rights to form part of European-wide law.

On March 12 the Trade and Industry Select Committee considered the distribution of newspapers. The publication of the report will be constrained by the election, but the evidence will be published and form the basis for our continuing campaign.

After the election we will circulate a model resolution to Constituency Labour Parties.

Censorship bandwagon runs on dodgy wheels

Ill Effects

Edited by Martin Barker and Julian Petley
Routledge £12.99

BATTLE LINES are being drawn more sharply in the crucial debate about media effects, and the Daily Mail's highly publicised campaign against the film *Crash* highlights the key issues. On Tuesday March 18 the British Board of Film Classification director, James Ferman, cleared the film for release with an 18 certificate.

The Mail's response was immediate, with a front-page splash. CENSOR'S YES TO DEPRAVED SEX FILM. Articles attacking the BBFC and the film appeared from the Media Correspondent, Sean Poulter; the Film critic, Christopher Tookey, and for good measure, the Evening Standard film critic, Alexander Walker, suggesting *Crash* could be the 'most corrupt movie ever made'.

Disappointed that its campaign to get the film banned failed the Mail has lined up the usual suspects to whip up moral outrage and target the BBFC itself, describing it as 'a moral watchdog without the will to bite'. The paper reports on a coalition of Christian and Moslem groups which has vowed to lobby councils, protest outside cinemas, and boycott products made by Sony, whose subsidiary, Columbia Tristar, is distributing the film in the UK.

Home Secretary, Michael Howard, warns that the BBFC could be replaced with a statutory body with much stronger teeth if it failed to stop film-makers 'smashing through the boundaries of taste and morality'.

We have, unfortunately, been here before. An horrific crime occurs, and those responsible are caught, tried and sentenced. But why did they do it? And a convenient explanation is to blame the crime on the media, or particular videos and films which caused the violent behaviour. For example, the film *Child's Play III* was blamed for the murder of James Bulger on the grounds that Jon Venable's father was alleged to have hired it some weeks before the crime though there was no evidence that Jon or Robert Thompson ever saw it.

In the wake of the murder trial the censorship lobby received a powerful boost when Professor Elizabeth Newson's report

was published in April 1994. And it was also in the welter of ill-informed debate around 'video violence' that the idea for the book *Ill Effects* developed. It is, as the editors describe, 'a polemic drawing on a body of academic research' which challenges those who argue that certain images are harmful to those that watch them and should be banned. The editors point out that 'arguments about effects (and

There is a worry that an increasingly authoritarian political consensus is emerging between Labour and Conservative politicians

therefore usually censorship) do not exist in an ideological vacuum and generally spring from deeply felt beliefs about how society should – and shouldn't be regulated'.

For example, behind the lobbying for the Alton Bill, which was withdrawn after Michael Howard toughened up controls on violent videos in the Criminal Justice Act, there was the Movement for Christian Democracy which used the Alton Bill and the Newson report as a means of 'coming of age politically'.

This is an important book which provides the background detail and

evidence used to support specific censorship campaigns, but also in a number of key chapters directly challenges the way issues of 'media effects' are used for purposes of control and censorship. Martin Barker provides an effective dissection of the appalling quality of evidence and arguments in the Newson report which was so influential in providing 'evidence' of media effects. In particular two chapters by Graham Murdock, 'Reservoirs of Dogma' from a UK perspective and Willard D. Rowland Jr, 'Television Violence Redux' from the USA, are full of insights.

Unfortunately this is also the sort of book that is going to be increasingly relevant, I fear. Critical arguments and ideas which challenge the censorship lobby and media effects theorists are pilloried or caricatured by the popular press. That's nothing new, but there is a worry that an increasingly authoritarian political consensus is emerging between Labour and Conservative politicians. The Mail thought it was a suspicious coincidence that James Ferman chose to pass *Crash* just as the election was called, but suggested that he may have misjudged the mood of Labour politicians.

Let's hope we don't see Jack Straw and Jack Cunningham jumping on the anti-*Crash* campaign which the Mail is so effectively promoting. A quick read of *Ill Effects* would be an ideal antidote if they feel so inclined.

Granville Williams



Order your copy from CPBF – price £7.50 inc p&p

ELECTIONWATCH '97 MEETINGS

MEETINGS in Huddersfield and London launched our Electionwatch '97 initiative.

Freelance journalist Tony Harcup, who coordinated a similar initiative in 1992, described some of the methods used by the press in the 1992 election, whilst Bob Franklin analysed what was likely to happen this time round. The meeting in Huddersfield, held on 12 February at the Media Centre, included a number of students studying politics and media at Huddersfield University who will be working on our media monitoring project.

At the London meeting three speakers were united in the belief that the tabloids were extremely influential in persuading floating voters to swing behind the Conservative party in 1992. However all three speakers believed that this time round the national press would be more lenient towards Tony Blair and the Labour Party.

Martin Linton, Guardian journalist and the author of *Was It the Sun Wot Won It?* pointed out the significance of the frequent interviews with Tony Blair in the Sun, "but it would be a mistake to think that the newspaper has suddenly become pro-Labour. It is and always will be anti-Labour." He also predicted "the Mail will take the edge off its anti-Labour stance and The Times will remain neutral. The last two times it remained neutral, 1945 and 1966, Labour won the election."

Dr Colin Sparks, an editor of *Media, Culture and Society*, also thought that within certain limits the press will be less virulent than in 1992. The Labour Party might get favourable coverage without the usual smears and witch hunts." He also stressed the importance of recording and



monitoring the press in the run-up to the election.

Julian Petley argued that "there are three areas concerned with the election as regards the Tories – tax, Europe and Constitutional reform. The press feels threatened by anything which could decentralise its power."

ELECTIONWATCH NEWS

MATERIAL on Electionwatch has gone out widely. UNISON and the NUJ have distributed material to all branches; articles have appeared in trade union journals, *New Times* and *Red Pepper* and we've done a number of radio interviews. Judith Weymont is coordinating Electionwatch from the Media Centre in Huddersfield.

Judith, a long-time CPBF member, has worked on local radio and for 11 years at YTV as a producer on documentaries and educational programmes. She has recently returned from two and a half years in Johannesburg as Press Officer for the SA National Union of Mineworkers

AGM/CONFERENCE SATURDAY 28 JUNE, LONDON.

THIS will be a key meeting for the CPBF. We urge all our members and supporters to put this date in your diaries and where possible to get delegated from your organisation to attend. The AGM will be held in the morning, and our conference will have three themes:

The Media After the Election
The Media and Racism
Unfinished Business

We are planning an event which will involve a range of distinguished speakers and stimulate discussion on future strategy for the CPBF.

FRINGE MEETINGS

WE ARE planning a number of fringe meetings at the TGWU and UNISON conferences, as well as the TUC and Labour Party conferences in Brighton. If you live in Brighton or nearby and can help us with leafleting and staffing stalls we'd really like to hear from you.

Key dates: **UNISON** 9-13 June
TGWU 7-11 July
TUC 8-12 Sept
Labour Party 29 Sept-3 Oct



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