

Public or private – it's money that matters

BEATING THE BEEB

THESE are trying times for the Beeb. In a House of Lords debate a former chairman, Marmaduke Hussey, attacked the corporation. Management policies took resources away from making programmes, as did the strategy of commercial expansion, he asserted. And he was joined by a stream of other Lords eager to criticise. Another ex-governor, PD James said the BBC managerial ethos was 'too tightly controlled, too bureaucratic, too secretive and too arrogant.'

And in ratings terms the BBC is being hit hard, too. Before ITV shut down News at Ten on 5 March BBC1's and ITV's ratings had been running neck and neck. In the week after ITV increased its share of the 10.00-10.30 slot by 40 per cent. With the help of the quiz show, Who Wants To Be A Millionaire?, ITV has beaten the BBC hollow.

Now this may only be short term and the appeal of the quiz show will fade. Indeed the BBC was in this position once before when the new ITV system launched, but under Director General, Hugh Green, it

pulled itself back into mainstream popular TV programming.

But that was in an era of expanding TV licence fee revenue for the BBC, two TV channels, and a regulatory regime which required ITV to carry a range of public service programmes. Now the ITV companies have to compete with satellite

Public service broadcasting needs to be defended... the government appears to face both ways

broadcasters, ensure that they can bid for the ever more expensive sports rights, and satisfy shareholders with their stock market performance.

In this climate public service broadcasting needs to be vigorously defended from the assaults of private media monopolies, but the

question is who will do it? Firstly, the government appears to face both ways. It was, after all, John Major who forced the ITV companies to back down when the idea to move News at Ten was first mooted; this time there was no such confrontation, and hard-headed business sense prevailed.

At the heart of the BBC's problems is finance. The Gavin Davies inquiry into the funding of the BBC is due to report in July.

Davies, in a pamphlet co-authored with Andrew Graham, argued for indexing the licence fee to a new measure of broadcasting costs. The authors were very clear that 'commercial broadcasting on its own would fail to produce the form of broadcasting which people individually or citizens and voters collectively require' and understood the social, cultural and educational value of public service broadcasting.

Let's hope Gavin Davies is still thinking on those lines now.

■ The CPBF evidence to the Gavin Davies inquiry is in this issue of Free Press

There's no accounting for Murdoch

QUESTION. How does a company which made A\$5.4 billion pre-tax profits in the four years to 30 June last year only pay A\$325 million corporate taxes world-wide?

THE Economist (20 March) attempted an answer, but with difficulty. The magazine pointed out that 'investigating News Corporations tax affairs is made especially hard by accounting standards in Australia, where the company is incorporated. They are the most lax of the developed economies.' In America many of the unlisted subsidiaries of Murdoch's listed companies are incorporated in Delaware where there is no obligation to file publicly available accounts.

But in the UK the laws require that he publish some facts, and this enabled The Economist to go through 11 years' worth of

financial results. Rupert Murdoch's News International, has since June 1987, made £1.4 billion in profits but it has paid no net British corporation tax at all.

The magazine offers different explanations for this puzzling state of affairs – News Corporation is an international company, which makes it easier to shift profits across national boundaries – but it is

Sky is embarking on a public relations exercise to promote the broadcaster's 'human face'

odd that the most profitable of News Corporation's British operations is not BSkyB or the Sunday Times, but News Publishers, a company incorporated in Bermuda. It made £1.6 billion in net

profits, 'a remarkable feat for a company which seems not to have any employees nor any obvious source of income from outside Mr Murdoch's companies.'

We understand that Sky is embarking on a concerted public relations exercise to promote the broadcaster's 'human face' to the community. The broadcaster is spending £6 million on 'Reach for the Sky' giving career advice to 14-16 year olds, as well as the £6 million sponsorship of the Millennium Dome.

But as we await the Monopolies and Mergers Commission report on Rupert Murdoch's bid for Manchester United football club, the lack of transparency in Mr Murdoch's financial affairs adds to a widespread perception that giving the green light to the take-over will mean that he uses his new acquisition to benefit his broadcasting interests.

BROADCASTING MINISTER BACKS 'LIGHTEST TOUCH' REGULATION

In a wide-ranging speech to the fifth international conference of the Voice of the Viewer and Listener, Janet Anderson, Minister for Film and Broadcasting, reiterated the government's commitment to modernise the regulatory framework, but to do so with the lightest possible touch to achieve clearly defined public service objectives. She believed that the BBC and channels 3, 4 and 5 would continue to have a central role: 'Even in cable and satellite homes, they account for almost two thirds of television viewing,' she said.

Turning to the future of regulation, she conceded that there were those who believed that convergence means no regulation, 'that in future, competition between a far greater number of providers will ensure that the market, unmolested by regulation, provides the necessary quality, variety and choice. That may eventually prove to be the case, but it would seem irresponsible to dismantle the regulatory safeguards on the basis of a guess about the future developments of the market,' she argued. It was also important for viewers and listeners to be able to articulate their views, whatever the regulatory framework.

The conference went on to examine the state of broadcasting in Europe from the citizens and users point of view, and explored the democratic and cultural contributions that broadcasting can make to European society. Other issues discussed included Council of Europe resolutions concerning public service broadcasting; the future of regulation in Europe and how the principle of universal service can be extended to ensure universal access to new digital broadcasting and multi-media service

BW

TRACK WARS

Four years ago a new Swedish newspaper hit the streets, or rather the Stockholm underground network. Metro, a free morning paper was launched with a readership of over 250,000. Today it's the capital's second biggest paper claiming a readership of over 600,000.

Sweden is one of the few countries which provide cash injections to newspapers in order to guarantee that citizens have access to information. These subsidies have been shrinking over recent years, but are expected to survive.

Metro raises its income from advertising, is very profitable and was recently extended to Sweden's second city, Goteborg. It's also big in Prague and appears soon in Budapest. News of Metro's success did not go unnoticed in Britain where the new Lord Rothermere launched his own freebie, London Metro, in mid-March. Aimed at tube travellers, and distributed at under-

WITHOUT COMMENT

The widely-promulgated notion that Joe Ashton MP is being hounded by the Murdoch press purely because he started the parliamentary fight against BSkyB buying Manchester United is most regrettable. Indeed to suggest that they dug up a months-old story, culminating in a vicious front-page attack in Wednesday's Sun, purely in order to promote Mr Murdoch's business interests covertly is both far-fetched and outrageous.

Simon Hoggart

The Guardian 20 March 1999

ground stations, it's effectively blocked any chance of the Swedes getting their feet in the tube doors. At first sight this may appear newspaper madness. There's only a limited amount of advertising revenue sloshing around and what on earth is Associated Newspapers up to competing with its own Evening Standard?

Maybe, but step forward Rupert Murdoch, never one to miss a business opportunity. Too late to launch his own version of a morning Metro, he's decided to go for an afternoon freebie, London Today, which will be distributed at above ground rail stations with a view to damaging Associates London Evening Standard. Just how this battle of the tracks will work out is difficult to predict.

If Metro is too good (it looks like Today without double vision colour) it could damage sales of both the Mail and Standard, the latter of which has numerous editions and considerable distribution costs. Murdoch's afternoon freebie may find difficulty in attracting enough advertising revenue, although he's quite prepared to pour money into his projects in the short term, in order to see off its rivals. Only time will tell, and maybe Murdoch is beginning to lose his grip! On the other hand the pattern could be repeated in other cities with a good rail network.

KILLING SECRETS

A campaign for strict and unequivocal export laws overseen by an independent body to monitor the arms trade, coupled with an attack on secrecy surrounding the export of weapons was launched in London in February.

Killing Secrets aims to expose the role of the intelligence services in promoting the arms trade. Launched by Rae McGrath, founder of the Mines Advisory Group, it

will also set up a 'whistleblowers service' for those who work in government and industry who wish to expose illegal activities in the export of arms.

The launch is timely. Three years ago the Scott Inquiry into the export of defence equipment to Iraq was released. Scott wanted a comprehensive review, with full public debate, about the refusal of the then Tory government to give information about arms sales. He urged MPs to be far more assertive in demanding information from Whitehall, even to the extent of instituting proceedings against ministers who refused to provide documents or who banned civil servants from giving evidence.

On the Scott Report's first anniversary in February 1997 Robin Cook, then shadow minister, warned that 'Ministers were prepared to use the cloak of national security not to preserve the nation's secrets, but to protect themselves from political exposure.' He called for a Freedom of Information Act, as a matter of urgency, to end secrecy in government.

Nearly two years into a Labour government, their enthusiasm for such a measure has cooled considerably. We're still waiting for a redrafted (and watered down) Bill which is unlikely to become law until 2001.

Killing Secrets is looking for supporters to form local action groups and to set up links with trade unions, student bodies, church organisations, women's groups, and other campaigning and social groups. It is contactable at killsecrets@msn.com or at PO Box 12, Wigton Delivery Office, Cumbria CA5 3DG.

CONSULTATION ON NEW MAI

Following the report in FP108, 'MAI Abandoned' the government, in response to the report of the Commons Trade and Industry Select Committee, has stated that 'any future international agreement is likely to be very different from the MAI...' But they go on to indicate that barriers to foreign investment continue to exist and that it would be beneficial to the UK, other countries and to the world economy, 'if action could be taken as a multilateral to address these barriers and provide a more stable climate for investment.'

The government is also consulting interested groups to see what they might want from any future investment agreement. Following these and other consultations they feel they will be in a better position to assess the rationale for future agreement.

In a letter to the CPBF, Select Committee Chair Martin O'Neill MP states that his committee will consider their response to government and may decide to hold a Commons debate. As we went to press, the Select Committee is holding discussions with the World Trade Organisation in Geneva about any follow-on from the failure of the MAI talks.

How Labour rewrote the rules

"LABOUR has come in and rewritten the rules," said Nick Jones, political correspondent and author of *Soundbites and Spin Doctors* in a well crafted speech at a recent London CPBF public meeting.

He told how Labour's 'spin machine' was 'bedding down' now that the resources of the state were being marshalled. Nick believed that Alastair Campbell and his colleagues had succeeded in transforming the way the Government was able to spin for itself. For the first time in British political history, politically appointed 'special advisors' had taken over from civil servants. Party activists and supporters with temporary civil servant status were putting down deep roots in Whitehall.

Campbell himself had unprecedented power and influence. He sat in cabinet meetings gave instructions to civil servants.

Nick said he was "one of the minority of political correspondents who believes that briefings given by the Prime Minister's press secretary in Downing Street should be televised." He accepted that there might be some loss in the flow of information if briefings were all on camera. "But this would be a very small sacrifice to set against a very important gain and a new and significant safeguard."

Earlier, journalist John Booth, a former chief press officer to Peter Mandelson said

that Mandelson was not the issue. It was the context in which spin doctoring, a form of political control and media manipulation, had developed on both sides of the Atlantic.

Its roots lay in the cold war and more particularly in the work of the Information Research Department which had waged a vigorous covert propaganda war against communism using journalists, politicians and academics, before its closure in 1977.

Broadcaster Joy Johnson said that in 1995 when she was Labour's Director of Communications she had written: "You don't win with spin." As part of new Labour's political process, spin had become indistinguishable from the political process, she said.



Nick Jones addresses the meeting with (from left) John Booth, Julian Petley and Joy Johnson

Spinning in virtual reality

Joy Johnson considers the issues

DESPITE the thousands of words about spin we lack a definition, so here is an attempt at defining spin. First, what spin is not. It is not about promoting your product, setting out your stall or doing any of the normal press relations to promote a campaign or a candidate.

In its benign form political spin is picking up the phone to feed the lobby correspondent the odd morsel so that they can sound well-informed. On 11 March 1999, during the early evening bulletins, the news of Oskar Lafontaine's resignation broke. Within ten minutes the Prime Minister's spokesman had phoned lobby correspondents to brief them. First, 'on the record': 'We have good relations with the German government and will continue to do so despite the resignation'. This spin we can define as benign and 'collusive'. Journalists want information, press officers provide it and everyone is happy. Then comes the Downing Street's off-the-record briefing for

the favoured Lobby correspondent, thus: 'We always knew Schroeder was the boss and yes the Prime Minister is pleased.'

Within minutes the spin is flowing through the communications channels in 'pieces-to-camera', down radio lines, and in headlines that read, 'there are no tears in Downing Street'. This is not actually a 'benign' form, although still collusive, but neither is it as 'malign' as the spin earlier in the year when it became known that Peter Mandelson, in his ambassadorial role to prepare for Britain's entry into monetary union, had been told to 'get Lafontaine'.

With the Cold War ended and ideology abandoned, the political strategies are those of 'triangulation' (Clinton) and 'convergence' (Blair). The battle for the centre is conducted in language that is obscure.

In 1994 Tony Blair made his first speech to party conference as leader with the memorable words, 'Say what you mean and mean what you say'. Echoing Neil Kinnock almost a decade earlier when Kinnock had confronted Militant head on, the new leader

Joy referred to Tony Blair's first speech as Labour leader when he proclaimed: "say what you mean and mean what you say". "To understand its meaning, the spin doctors had to translate it for the press and they were amazed at its audacity." It marked the start of the abandonment of Clause 4.

With a conservative national press basically hostile to the Euro, the Government decided to change the terrain to promote their new pro-Europe message. "The mainstream press is sidelined, the regional press flattered. Broadcasters are told to explain more and analyse less."

A lively discussion followed with a wide-ranging questions and answers session. But debate continues.

declared that to win the election Labour had to be razed to the ground, Clause Four of the constitution had to be abolished and Labour had to be born again as 'New Labour'. Well, no, not quite. What he really said was, 'We need a modern statement of our party's aims and values.' In a post-ideological age, spin and policy are indistinguishable so that the speech has to be spun by the interpreters of the language.

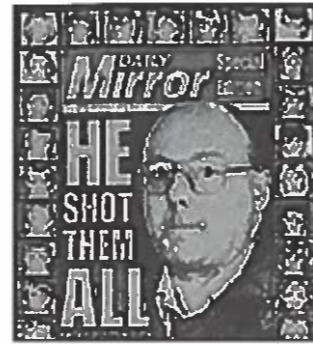
Political spin can be characterised as either malign and dealing in deceit or benign by throwing morsels to the lobby. It was born with the end of ideas. Politicians hold the belief that what happens in the political world does not matter - only perceptions matter. They behave as if politics were not about objective reality but virtual reality and therefore not surprisingly they rely on the doctors of spin.

Buy the pamphlet *The CPBF Book service* has copies of *Tough on soundbites, tough on the causes of soundbites: New labour and news management* by Bob Franklin. It costs £5.50 inc P&P. Order from CPBF National Office.

If you're going to suffer a tragedy, make sure you're middle class



Ann Jemphrey and Eileen Berrington discuss some of the issues relating to press coverage of the Hillsborough Football Disaster (1989) and the tragedy which occurred at Dunblane Primary School in Scotland (1996)



HILLSBOROUGH

ON 15 APRIL 1989 the FA Cup semi-final between Liverpool FC and Nottingham Forest became the scene of an appalling tragedy. Even before the disaster, Liverpool had been at the receiving end of a 'bad press' from national newspapers. Negative images and stereotypes of 'scousers' were important elements in debates about complex political-economic issues affecting the city. Much of the national press reporting in the immediate aftermath of the Hillsborough disaster echoed well-worn themes and assumptions.

The main cause of the Hillsborough disaster was police failure to monitor overcrowding in the central pens designated for Liverpool supporters. This resulted in ninety-six people losing their lives, with hundreds more injured due to crushing. However, initial press reporting focused on football hooliganism and alcohol as primary factors. Although the disaster took place in Sheffield, Merseyside, the home of most of those who died, became the focal point of negative commentary. This set an agenda whereby those involved were depicted as less-than-innocent victims. In the week following the disaster, allegations regarding Liverpool supporters' behaviour became increasingly vitriolic, culminating in the infamous Sun headline, *THE TRUTH*, (19.4.89) where a number of serious unsubstantiated allegations were made.

Subsequently these reports, many of which carried either unsupported allegations from anonymous police officers or quotes from the Police Federation, were found to have been distorted or completely fabricated.

Other major concerns emerging from the coverage centred on media intrusion in the

hospitals and funerals, 'doorstepping' the bereaved and the use of deception, including posing as social workers, to gain information about those who died.

The legacy for those directly affected by the disaster was one where grieving relatives, trying to deal with their loss, were faced with an additional burden of defending the innocence of loved ones. Survivors, many of whom had witnessed profoundly traumatising events and suffered terrible injuries, were themselves subjected to the 'finger of blame'. Despite the efforts of the bereaved and survivors of the Hillsborough disaster to counteract the persistent myths relating to blame and causation, misconceptions continue to influence debate.

DUNBLANE

ON 13 MARCH 1996, Thomas Hamilton walked into the gymnasium at Dunblane Primary School and opened fire on a class of five and six year olds, before fatally shooting himself. Sixteen children and their teacher died and many others were injured.

Journalists agreed that coverage of Dunblane was exceptional in terms of its restraint and sensitivity towards the bereaved, the survivors and the community. While this does not diminish the problems which the sheer numbers of media personnel descending on Dunblane created, it does raise questions as to why coverage was qualitatively different to that of Hillsborough.

Journalists involved in reporting Dunblane referred to the importance of the role of editors. An editor at the time of Hillsborough stated, 'we cannot be expected to give overriding consideration to the Hillsborough families in our coverage'. With Dunblane, editors were clearly aware of the sensitive nature of the story and warned staff against causing offence or adding to the distress of those involved. A senior journalist felt that press behaviour was 'influenced by the need not to offend the sensibilities of the people who had suffered. That's the last thing you want to do, to add further pain.'

There is a pressing need for increased awareness of the harmful effects of insensitive and inaccurate reporting and of the dangers of accepting 'official' versions of events too readily

Two days after the tragedy, Lord Wakeham, Chair of the Press Complaints Commission (PCC), had written to all editors reminding them of their responsibilities in relation to the PCC code. In addition, the police took the unusual step of relating a formal message on behalf of the families asking the media to respect their privacy. While there were instances of media intrusion, initially there was consensus among broadsheet editors and staff not to 'doorstep' the bereaved in the immediate aftermath. The media also took the decision to withdraw before the funerals took place. The action was described by journalists as 'unprecedented'.

Negative perceptions of Merseyside provided the backdrop to many comment and 'colour pieces' relating to Hillsborough. With Dunblane, frequent reference was made to the

high proportion of middle-class residents, who had chosen the locality because it seemed so 'safe'. Many Scottish reporters lived in or had close personal links with Dunblane. Their beliefs became part of the ideological context within which Dunblane's identity was constructed and disseminated to a global audience. It was, in effect, a self-fulfilling prophecy in that journalists observed and recorded what they expected to find – a safe, close-knit, middle-class community, 'the last place on earth' for such an act of violence.

The Dunblane victims were mainly very young children, members of a small, defined locality. This facilitated the setting up of measures to protect the privacy of those involved. In addition, despite some criticism of Central Scotland Police Force over gun-licensing procedures, the police were not under the same pressure to deflect blame, as was the case post-Hillsborough.

In stark contrast to Hillsborough, there were relatively few complaints about the coverage of the Dunblane tragedy. In retrospect, will Dunblane be viewed as a 'one-off' example of self-regulation in practice, or have lessons been learned from the hurtful and grossly insensitive reporting of Hillsborough? The fierce debates which have raged over the ability of the PCC to ensure press accountability have undoubtedly had an effect. Threats of statutory legislation (albeit less in evidence from the present government) have pushed and prodded the press industry into 'putting its house in order'. Moreover, the incorporation of the Human Rights Act (1998) into domestic law has generated renewed debate over press freedom. Following successful lobbying the PCC will come under its jurisdiction. Articles 8 and 10, on privacy and freedom of expression respectively, provide certain safeguards but also offer up contradictory messages, yet to be tested out in the courts.

Journalists freely admit that code of practice are frequently rendered unworkable in the face of commercial pressures to 'get the story'. Training and support for journalists involved in the reporting of sudden death or disaster is virtually non-existent. There is a pressing need for increased awareness of the enduring and harmful effects of insensitive and inaccurate reporting, and of the dangers of accepting 'official' versions of events too readily, particularly where those in a powerful position to 'shape' the media may be implicated.

While acknowledging examples of good practice within the Dunblane coverage, it is essential that the press continue to build on this minimum standard to ensure that future disaster reporting is undertaken with due consideration of the needs of the bereaved and the survivors.

Ann Jemphrey and Eileen Berrington are at the Centre for Studies in Crime and Social Justice, Edge Hill College of Higher Education, Ormskirk.

CPBF evidence to the BBC Funding Review Panel

THE SCOPE OF THE REVIEW

1 The Campaign is concerned about the terms of reference and timescale of the review. Decisions about the funding of the BBC have long term implications for the BBC, public service broadcasting and the development of other forms of communications. Bracketing the issue off in this manner, and forcing discussion into a tight timetable suggests that the government does not want a full open public debate. The campaign recommends that the findings of the inquiry are considered by a full scale public inquiry into the future of broadcasting.

THE LICENCE FEE

2 The licence fee remains the most appropriate way in which to fund that element of public service broadcasting which is provided by the BBC. [i] It should be indexed linked to reflect real rises in labour and technology costs. [ii] The government should consider extending the existing concessionary licence fee schemes to help those people least able to afford the fee. Funding for this can come, in part, from sales of BBC programmes and, in part, from payment through the benefit system. An independent body could be established, free from government control, which would determine the amount needed each year for this subsidy. The money could be raised via direct taxation.

2 [a] Payment of the licence fee should guarantee access to an BBC and other public service broadcasters services. BBC services should not be delivered in a form which requires the licence fee payer to pay twice for services already paid for, either by being on an individual pay-per-view or subscription basis, or 'bundled' with other services where access is governed by extra payment.

2 [b] Extending income for the BBC should be looked at in the context of the general economic environment. It is unfair to suggest that broadcasters with strong positive programming requirements should have to compete with companies who have very few. The government should move towards extending positive programming requirements to all

terrestrial, digital and satellite services which serve the UK. This can be done by establishing income and audience thresholds, which once reached, trigger the obligation to provide a wider range of programming. In time this would at least allow public service broadcasting, by definition a more expensive and socially beneficial product than those provided in the main by broadcasters with no such obligations, to compete on a level playing field.

2 [c] An extra licence fee levied on receivers of digital equipment would be a negative development. It would raise serious objections from commercial operators who would argue that this was inhibiting their development and favouring the BBC. It might be vulnerable to successful challenge under competition law. It would open the door for a sustained campaign to abolish the licence fee.

3 There is widespread concern about the BBC's commercial trading activities. Whilst it is sensible for the BBC to sell its programmes and products, it is not sensible for increasingly larger parts of the Corporation to be turned into commercial concerns. This will continue to, as it already has, raise objections from commercial operators about 'unfair competition', and places major pressures on the public service element to respond more and more to commercial imperatives. The BBC should be organised primarily as a public service programme maker and should not seek to behave like a commercial company.

4 We consider that the funding of the BBC cannot be viewed primarily as a question of economics. It is an area which involves questions of public utility and welfare. As such the Government should take steps to view the future of the BBC in the context of the wider development of mass communications in the form of an inquiry. It should not be satisfied with excluding the wider public from this debate by conducting narrowly focused inquiries into major matters of public concern as if they were purely technical economic questions.

Tom Baistow

Distinguished and radical journalist

THE CAREER of Tom Baistow, who died on 8 March at the age of 84, spanned a period of great change in journalism. He worked

on the News Chronicle in Manchester during the 1930s and briefly after the war, until he accepted a job as deputy features editor of the News Chronicle at its London headquarters in Bouverie Street. The News Chronicle was associated with radical, anti-fascist views during the thirties, and after the war its readership was left leaning until the News Chronicle was absorbed into the Daily Mail in October 1960. When the Cadbury family closed the paper down the News Chronicle was still selling a million copies a day, and Tom Baistow, as father of the NUJ chapel fought hard to secure the best deal he could for all those thrown out of work so suddenly.

He then moved on to the Daily Herald. In 1964 the Herald was transformed into the High Cudlipp Sun, but Baistow didn't feel at home on the paper 'born of the age in which we live' and accepted the invitation of Paul Johnson to join the staff of the New Statesman, where he soon became

deputy editor. He was deputy editor under Paul Johnson, Richard Crossman and Anthony Howard. He also ran a column in Michael Foot's Tribune analysing the press.

In 1976 he left to take a job as press officer and lecturer in the new School of Journalism at City University. His book *Fourth-Rate Estate*, published in 1985 was an account of the newspaper world pre-Wapping. Whilst at the Statesman Tom campaigned for a Right of Reply Act, and as a member of the Labour Party media committee was involved in drafting a bill which was killed at first reading.

Tom Baistow recruited James Cameron to the News Chronicle, and they were close friends. After his death he organised the annual James Cameron lecture at City University to celebrate and remind people of his contribution to journalism. Perhaps there should now be an event at City University to celebrate the life of this other distinguished journalist.

Olive Shapley

Pioneer of social documentaries

OLIVE Shapley died on March 13 aged 88. For those interested in the early history of radio, she was an important and pioneering

figure. She writes about this period – and much more – in her autobiography, *Broadcasting a Life*, published by Scarlet Press in 1996. Olive Shapley – she was named after Olive Schreiner, author of *Story of an African Farm* – got a job as organiser of Children's Hour at the BBC in Manchester in 1934.

The year before Archie Harding had arrived as Director of Programmes for BBC North, and he set about recruiting a group of highly talented people – journalists, actors and writers – to make programmes and find new ways of expressing the character of Northern England and its people. These included Wilfred Pickles, Joan Littlewood, the singer Ewan McColl and a Manchester poet and writer, Geoffrey Bridson.

Olive Shapley was the pioneer of social documentaries which relied on the use of recorded actuality material. The Mobile Recording Unit was a twenty seven feet long van which fully loaded weighed seven tons, and she took the van all over the

region to record people talking in their homes, at work and on the street. Her first programme, presented by Wilfred Pickles, was on shopping, followed by features on canal workers, long distance lorry drivers, homeless people, miners' wives, and twenty four hours in the life of a big hotel from the staff's point of view.

In *The Classic Soil* (1939) she compared the housing, diet, and clothing of working people in Manchester and Salford with the details outlined by Engels in *The Condition of the Working Class in England in the 1840s*, and the programme was criticised by Manchester Corporation for its lack of 'balance'.

She continued to work in radio and television into the 1960s, presenting *Woman's Hour* and devising an innovative TV books programme, *Something to Read*, with Guardian journalist, Brian Redhead as the presenter (she had to fight to get him as the presenter – the BBC objected to his incomprehensible Geordie accent).

ALTERNATIVE VOICES AND VIEWS

■ **Adbusters**, the Canadian magazine, offers activist commentary from around the world and exposes of corporate media manipulation.

Its current campaign is for a Media Carta – a formal right for all of us to air our views in a world dominated by 'mighty media megacorporations'. The Media Carta, it argues, is the great human-rights battle of the information age and will enshrine the 'right to access' and 'the right to communi-

cate' as fundamental human rights.

See their website: www.adbusters.org

■ **Undercurrents**, a group of video activists, is now well-established in the UK and groups like them operate in the USA, Australia, New Zealand and Western Europe. The groups recognise the power of the visual image, but also that mainstream television news is ratings driven and focuses on safe, populist news stories.

■ **Freespeech TV (FSTV)** based in

Colorado, USA runs a public access TV station dedicated to social and environmental justice issues.

■ **Paper Tiger** is a public access TV programme broadcast in New York and San Francisco, and like Undercurrents sets out to challenge the output of the mass communications industry.

Undercurrents: www.undercurrents.org

Freespeech TV: www.freespeech.org

Paper Tiger: www.papertiger.org

State control

Britain's Secret Propaganda War 1948-1977

Paul Lashmar and James Oliver
(Sutton Publishing £25)

SLOWLY but surely the Left in Britain is discovering its hidden history and though this latest instalment doesn't come cheap, it's worth every penny. For what reporter Paul Lashmar and historian James Oliver have done in Britain's Secret Propaganda War is reveal the covert activities of a huge state-funded "anti-Communist" operation whose reach extended deep into the trade union movement, journalism, politics and academia for three decades.

They also throw light on present-day politics, for the patterns of links the Information Research Department (IRD) established have remained long after the Cold War for which it was ostensibly created. And its techniques, including lobbying, rapid rebuttal and using "opinion-formers" to shift the ground of political debate, continue to be much imitated, not least by "New" Labour.

Set up in 1948 as a Foreign Office/MI6 propaganda operation, IRD was largely unknown not only to the British public but to the Members of Parliament who nodded its enormous secret budget through each year.

Using the old-boy network IRD placed its people in many parts of the British media and academic world. At home, it bolstered anti-Communists against those less enthusiastic for the Cold War, the Atlantic alliance and nuclear deterrence. Abroad, it conducted operations in the Middle and Far East and the in the Commonwealth, together with specific campaigns in Greece, Malaya, against Nasser during the Suez crisis and Sukarno in Indonesia.

Those who remember Woodrow Wyatt using his News of the World column to recommend "moderate" slates for union elections will learn that he was regularly using IRD material. So was Denis Healey in his postwar job as international secretary of the Labour party and Vic Feather at the TUC. Generations of students who read the standard textbook, *The Theory and Practice of Communism*, were similarly unaware that author R N Carew-Hunt was an MI6/IRD officer paid to produce it.

This quartet were just the very tip of the

huge iceberg that was IRD. At its peak in the 1960s, it totalled hundreds of full-timers and many more semi-detached associates in dozens of covert activities.

"The effect of all these operations was staggering," say Lashmar and Oliver. "It was the British state that first realised that, by backing potential opinion formers, you could alter the political spectrum."

"The IRD had it both ways. Selected journalists and academics who had the resources of the British intelligence service and the Foreign Office at their disposal artificially enhanced their reputations. But IRD was able to promote the reputation of its own people by slipping them in among the more respectable academics that graced its article and book lists."

Those who cashed in on "the zero-sum and two-dimensional framework of relations that the Cold War had become" included a sizeable proportion of those promoting British entry into what was then called the Common Market. The authors detail a massive covert IRD operation at the time of the referendum on membership – one justified, presumably, on the same "anti-communism" grounds as US funding of the early European Movement itself.

In their description of this giant exercise in deception the authors remind us that IRD was small beer alongside parallel US operations, including in Britain, at the time. But they also remind us that IRD was just part of a much bigger anti-Left network in Britain. The Economic League was busy blacklisting and Moral Rearmament, Common Cause and then the Industrial Research and Information Service (IRIS) were all well-resourced operations ploughing the same "anti-Communist" furrow.

Lashmar and Oliver do not have space to detail how all these campaigns were linked – Lobster editor Robin Ramsay has done this best to date in his *Clandestine Caucus* – but they do more than enough to draw this chilling conclusion:

"Though IRD was closed in 1977, its spirit lives on in many ways at the intersection between politics and the media. Any organisation that can propagate its message in such a way that it appears to be a consensus reached by diverse opinions, yet is really a script written by one person or group of people, ultimately threatens public perception of any issue."

John Booth

Freedom of information – alive and well

This April sees the first anniversary of the introduction of a Freedom of Information Act in an English-speaking country. On 21 April 1998 the Act came into force in the Irish Republic. The Act established three new statutory rights: a legal right for each person to access information held by public bodies; a legal right for each person to have official information relating to her/himself amended where it is incomplete, incorrect or misleading; and a legal right to obtain reasons for decisions affecting oneself. The Act also asserts the right of the public to obtain access to official information 'to the greatest extent possible consistent with the public interest and the right to privacy of individuals'. Although the Act was passed in 1997 the government departments were given a year to prepare for its introduction.

Not everything is open to scrutiny. The police are excluded at the moment. There are exemptions to protect so-called sensitive information where disclosure may damage key interests of the State and third parties. Where these are operated, the decision may be appealed. The first stage is an internal review carried out by an official at a high level, and dissatisfaction with this can lead to an appeal and review by the Information Commissioner. Charges for information can also be made under the Act.

Figures recently released show that to the end of 1998 the Justice Department received the most requests under the Act (306) They were followed closely by the Revenue Commissioners who received 305 requests. In total more requests were made by staff employed in government departments who wanted to see their own personal records (573) than journalists (506). Requests from business were 413. The total number received was 2997 of which 1903 were granted or part-granted. The remainder were either refused, withdrawn, transferred, subject to appeal or are still 'live'.

Meanwhile in Britain Home Secretary Jack Straw who currently has responsibility for any new information has been put on the spot over FOI by the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry. Recommendation 9 states that 'a Freedom of Information Act should apply to all areas of policing, both operational and administrative, subject only to the "substantive harm" test for withholding disclosure.'

**HELP WISH US
A HAPPY BIRTHDAY**

THIS September the CPBF is 20 years old. To mark the occasion the September/October edition of Free Press will be a bumper 12 pages timed to coincide with the TUC and Labour Party Conferences.

To finance the bigger issue we will be approaching our supporters to take space and express messages of support for the CPBF. Please raise this issue within your organisation and make sure you reserve your space in plenty of time by contacting the National Office.

The advertising rates are set out below:
Eighth page £55 Quarter page £85
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Help us to make Free Press a big birthday edition!

**CONFERENCE AND AGM
SATURDAY MAY 15 1999**

OUR conference and AGM this year will be held at the London Resource Centre on Holloway Road, Islington. It's a comfortable and convenient location, and we urge all our



members and supporters to come along to shape the discussion and future development of the CPBF. Book the date in your diary now.

The conference is on the theme **Labour And The Media: The Mid-Term Report**. We have invited a number of speakers, and so far have acceptances from John McDonnell MP, media academic James Curran and Maurice Frankel of the Campaign for Freedom of Information.

The timings for the day are:

Registration 10.00
Conference 10.30-3.30
AGM 3.30-4.30

**CPBF SCOTLAND
INAUGURAL MEETING**

JUST a few weeks before the voting for the Scottish Parliament CPBF in Scotland are holding a fringe meeting at the Scottish

TUC to launch and build support for CPBF in Scotland. The theme of the meeting is The Press and the Parliament and speakers include Free Press editor, Granville Williams.

The meeting will be at lunchtime on Tuesday April 20th at City Halls, Glasgow

Trade union sponsors of the meeting include the NUJ, GPMU, BECTU and UNISON

**BRITAIN'S MEDIA:
HOW THEY ARE RELATED**

THE CPBF published this book to promote the democratic case for controls and limits on media ownership. The book costs £6.99 (£7.50 inc P&P) and we are now down to the last 100 or so copies for sale. Now is the time to order copies either for college or university libraries, or for your personal use. Send your orders to the National Office.

There are plans to produce a new edition, completely updated and covering media policy issues in the UK, Europe and the United States. This will be published by Pluto Press, and should be available for the Labour Party conference in Autumn 1999.

Anger as ITC turns off Kurdish TV station

THE Independent Television Commission has taken the unprecedented step of ordering a TV station off the air. Med TV a London based satellite service for Kurdish viewers was closed down at 8.00 pm on 22 March for 21 days for broadcasting

programmes "likely to encourage or to incite crime or lead to disorder". Last November the ITC issued a notice to Med TV that its licence would be revoked if, over the following six months, its services failed to comply with the terms of its

licence and the Programme Code.

The Kurdish Solidarity Committee has condemned the closure. In a letter to the ITC they accuse it of bowing to pressure from the Turkish government and call for an urgent review of the decision.

Free Press is edited by Granville Williams for the National Council



CPBF web site: www.cpbfdemon.co.uk
Email address: freepress@cpbf.demon.co.uk

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