

## Labour retreats on information Bill

THERE were bad omens before the draft version of the delayed Freedom of Information Bill was finally published on Monday 24 May.

Civil servants associated with the White Paper published in 1997 were taken off the work when responsibility was transferred from Dr David Clarke to Jack Straw at the Home Office.

The Bill was due in early 1998, but failed to materialise, and was left out of

the Queen's Speech last November. Jack Straw is still evasive about whether it will be in the next Queen's Speech.

But the response to the publication of the Bill has been startlingly negative. Maurice Frankel, the Director of the Campaign for Freedom of Information, said he was "deeply disappointed" by a package of proposals which he said were even less radical than the policies on access to information adopted by the previous

Conservative government.

The government's Bill "achieves the remarkable feat of making the code, introduced by a government opposed in principle to freedom of information, appear a more positive measure than legislation drawn up by a government committed to the issue for 25 years," he said.

The Bill includes 21 exemption clauses,

→ continued

**EIGHT HUNDRED** people flocked to a meeting of the CPBF-backed Campaign for Accurate Reporting and Free Speech on War in Central Hall, Westminster, on May 5.

Broadcaster John Pilger joined MPs Tony Benn, Alice Mahon, Jeremy Corbyn and Tam Dalyell, Barry White from the CPBF and John Rees of Media Workers Against the War in denouncing the pro-war coverage.

Barry White (right) told the meeting how history showed that in wars the media were always biased, but the public deserved to know what was going on.

John Pilger said that media workers in Britain should go on strike in protest; everyone at the BBC should have walked out in solidarity when NATO bombed the Serbian TV studios.

Tony Benn said there was a need to build popular opposition to the war; it was meetings like this that would stop the war, not Parliament, since MPs were given no say in its conduct.

John Rees said the war was not about the fair treatment of minorities in the Balkans, but about oil



— since the pipeline from the Caucasus oilfields would be running through the area.

A message of solidarity was read out from the general secretary of the International Federation of Journalists, Aidan White, who had been due to speak but was instead in Belgrade, pressing for the

release of journalists detained by the Yugoslav authorities, and establishing the IFJ's support office for journalists there.

The IFJ is also opening offices in Tirana and Skopje, as part of its action plan to help journalists suffering in the war.

## CPBF'S WAR AIMS

IN TIMES of war the media are on their mettle. Governments need popular support and the pressures on journalists to toe the line are great. If the nation is in peril journalists will be motivated to defend it.

Nobody pretends the west is in peril from Yugoslavia. Yet virtually the entire national press supports the massive bombardment of that country.

Even though the real war aims are far from clear and NATO leaders are at loggerheads, even with civilian bombing catastrophes virtually every day, the call is for a

ground war that could drag on for years to no apparently achievable end.

Opposition to the war around the world is hardly reported in Britain.

Independent reporting, away from the briefings and the refugee camps, hardly exists. Stories with a PR spin from NATO, masterminded by Alastair Campbell from the Downing Street press office, are reported as fact. Ministers and generals are interviewed respectfully. Stories from Belgrade backed up with TV footage are reported with suspicion.

In this context the CPBF has joined the National Union of Journalists in running a Campaign for Accurate Reporting and Free Speech on War. Based in the NUJ office, the campaign aims to monitor the coverage, to try to engage media workers in debate, to publicise the need for fairer coverage and maintain contact with people dissatisfied with the it.



The office number at the NUJ is 0171-843 3704; fax 0171-278 6617. Or you can make contact through the CPBF's own office, 0171-278 4430.

# Sucked down

**Duncan Forbes** analyses the demise of the video-activist group, **Undercurrents**

THE video news magazine, *Undercurrents*, produces its final edition this month after five years at the vanguard of innovative dissent. Covering a range of popular struggles, for the most part ignored by mainstream broadcasters, its archive provides a compelling record of grassroots protest in the 1990s.

Evolving from the use of video to monitor the behaviour of police and private security guards, *Undercurrents* has always focused on getting activists to film and speak for themselves. Its reportage – including environmental and land rights campaigns, peace activism and world development issues – makes no false claims of objectivity, and forces the viewer to think more critically about the process of news production.

The reasons for the magazine's demise are primarily financial, linked to its directors' constant struggle to distribute their work. Editions are distributed mainly by subscription, often encouraged – paradoxically – by favourable coverage in the mainstream press. Although the big video distributors have shown some interest in circulating *Undercurrents*, its producers have been unable to raise the vast sums of money required for marketing their work. Their experience suggests that for those interested in sustaining a diverse and plural media culture, it is distribution and not production that is the central problem of our times.

*Undercurrents*'s greatest influence has been in creating a host of new activists eager to exploit domestic video technologies for public ends. New video collectives have recently been established – like the Bristol-based i-Contact group – and many

protest movements now use video to document and promote their cause.

*Undercurrents* has also pushed the major broadcasters to cover more environment issues and it continues to sell footage to news producers across the world. The *Undercurrents* Foundation plans to continue building its archive – currently sponsored by the Body Shop – making material available for work in schools and universities.

Is there a future for activist video news? Paul O'Connor, an *Undercurrents* director, is cautious: "It's difficult to say; if we'd known the hurdles involved we'd probably never have begun. But having said that, we did put out ten editions." In a climate of deregulation, with distributors transferring the costs of competition onto small-scale producers, it is unlikely that the problems of circulation will be easily resolved. But internet webcasts and the gradual appearance of local terrestrial television offer potential outlets for do-it-yourself material. If activists continue to take advantage of evolving media technologies, the spirit of *Undercurrents* may well survive. *Undercurrents*: 01865 203662 [www.undercurrents.org](http://www.undercurrents.org) i-Contact: [www.gifford.co.uk](http://www.gifford.co.uk) Community Media Association: [www.commedia.org.uk](http://www.commedia.org.uk)

## STILL WORTH READING

Thomas Harding was co-founder of *Undercurrents*. He's also the author of *The Video Activist Handbook*, published by Pluto Press, £11.99. Arguing that the powers that control the media and the practices that govern it have stifled political debate, the book charts the recent rise of direct action/DIY culture and shows how to move into producing and distributing programmes.

The response of the press to the Bill was also hostile, with the exception of *The Times* which saw it as 'a step forward'.

But for other papers headlines like 'feeble', 'toothless', and 'deeply flawed' summed up the sense of disappointment at this retreat by the government from one of its more radical manifesto commitments.

Of course, some sections of society will be relieved.

The veil of secrecy which has so long obscured commercial activity, such as the arms trade, will remain; as will information by government departments relating to the formulation or development of government policy'.

This last exemption will make central government "more secret" than it already

# Media media

PROGRESS on the plan to launch the Media Channel, the global media and democracy supersite which is being produced in a partnership between Globalvision and OneWorldOnline, was outlined in a recent project update.

The Media Channel will feature the best news and information from a wide range of participating not-for-profit media organisations. It will be a non-partisan online centre focusing on the media, with an emphasis on journalism, freedom of expression, citizen access to the media, trends in media ownership, media reform, media arts, and media coverage practices. Designed to look and act like a news site – similar to CNN.com, for example – it will link to articles on the websites of responsible organisations who are engaged in media and media-related work.

The Media Channel will follow the model of OneWorldOnline, generating revenue from a variety of sources, but with the aim of becoming self-sustaining after five years. Initial operating funding will be from foundation grants.

Hundreds of media-related organisations regularly post reports, columns and educational material on their websites, and the Media Channel plans to aggregate this data, analysis and reporting under the umbrella of a single supersite. The CPBF is one of 100 partner groups which the Media Channel will be working with.


For more information contact: Executive Editor Danny Schechter at [dschechter@globalvision.org](mailto:dschechter@globalvision.org) Site Director Ken Jordan at [ken1@ibm.net](mailto:ken1@ibm.net) OneWorld Online is at [www.oneworld.org](http://www.oneworld.org)

is, Maurice Frankel asserts.

This Bill would have been a great opportunity for Labour to show that secrecy, sleaze and spin-doctoring would be replaced by structures which would open up areas of our society so that decision-making became open, transparent and accountable.

Instead powerful and entrenched groups – the police, the security services, the civil servants, government ministers and powerful corporations – can relax.

It will be business as usual, with their workings remaining under wraps.

 The Campaign for Freedom of Information website is: [www.cfoi.org.uk](http://www.cfoi.org.uk)

# Who will get Birt's job?

MAYBE we should be grateful for small mercies. John Birt moved from being Deputy Director General into the key post of Director General of the BBC without any process of competitive interview, because of the patronage of a Thatcherite appointment as Chair of BBC governors, Marmaduke Hussey.

This time we have a queue of people lining up to be interviewed for the top job. One contender, Greg Dyke, has been a target both from the Murdoch press, suggesting that a donation of £50,000 to the Labour party disqualifies him, but also from senior BBC staff who have contacted newspapers to dismiss his suitability. The real shock though was the news that amongst the list of the great and the good of the media world, the former Murdoch Sunday Times editor, Andrew Neil, is a contender. Now the briefest glance at his public statements on the BBC as an institution, and the idea of public service broadcasting generally, would

## THE DODGY D NOTICE SYSTEM

Well it's good to know that Rear-Admiral David Pulvertaft (rtd) has something to keep him busy. He's the secretary of the D-Notice Committee, and it's his job to ensure that media reports which might be injurious to the defence of the realm get spiked.

Take the case of reporter and writer Tony Geraghty whose book, *The Irish War*, has been on sale for several months. When the book was due to be published the Rear-Admiral wrote to the publishers, HarperCollins, inviting them to submit the book for pre-publication censorship. Tony Geraghty and his publishers declined this service, and were informed the book would be read after publication and if there were any breaches of defence security, they would be hearing from the Rear-Admiral again.

The book was published seven months ago but last December Ministry of Defence police raided Geraghty's Herefordshire home, interrogated him for several hours and he was subsequently placed on police bail. Now he has been charged under section 5 of the Official Secrets Act on matters related to his book, and Nigel Wylde who helped Geraghty with information in the book has been charged under section 2 of the Secrets Act. The peculiar aspect of this affair is that the Rear-Admiral has said publicly he did not initiate the action. The other point is why Ministry of Defence police were involved – they protect MoD property and police the actions of military

suggest this would be rather like putting the fox in charge of the hen-house.

Other contenders are BBC staff Tony Hall, head of News, Mark Byford who runs the World Service and Alan Yentob, director of TV. The successful candidate will be paid £400,000 to run an organisation with 22,000 employees and a £2.7 billion annual budget. The BBC remains a preeminent institution both nationally and internationally, and the process of selection of the person who runs it should concern us all.

But the key people taking the decision about who will get the top job are the governors. It might surprise licence fee payers that the governors have been tucked away in a Kent castle, and as a result of some brainstorming sessions, have come up with a blueprint for the BBC's future, to rebrand the organisation as a public service broadcaster in a digital age when viewers will have more than 200 channels to choose from. And whoever gets the top job will



personnel, not civilians. And the doughty Secretary of State for Defence, George Robertson, is happy with the situation too.

Hard on the heels of this story was the revelation that a disgruntled former MI6 agent, Richard Tomlinson, had thrown the spy outfit into turmoil by publishing agents' names on the Internet. Tomlinson subsequently denied he had, but the information was there to be read and again the Rear-Admiral leapt into action reminding newspaper editors of their responsibilities, and forbidding publication of any agents' names under a D-notice. The editors obliged.

The CPBF has always opposed the idea of arbitrary powers to limit access to information and to censor the media, which is precisely what the function of the D-notice system is. It is deeply ironic that both these cases occurred in the weeks before the government finally decided to publish its Freedom of Information Bill. We shall see where the government has decided to draw the line in the struggle between secrecy and freedom of information.

## DID YOU SEE?

There was a fascinating job ad. in the *Media Guardian* to work for NTL as a European

have to turn the blueprint into reality.

Of course it would be naive to think that the governors are sorting out the selection of the next DG on their own. We can be sure that soundings and discreet discussions will be going on all the time between 10 Downing Street, the Culture Ministry and the BBC governors. But the real issue is that in the end the BBC governors who take this vital decision are in their posts not through any democratic process of selection and appointment but through a system of patronage which is at times close to nepotism. Mrs Thatcher, fueled by her intense dislike of the BBC, abused the system and appointed governors to do her bidding, for example.

The CPBF has long argued for a clear, open and democratic process of appointment of governors for the BBC. Surely it's time for the Culture Secretary to move on what would be an important act of democratisation within this key broadcasting institution. There has to be a better way.

Regulatory Affairs manager (salary £42k-£52k). It tells us a lot about how media policy is shaped these days.

NTL, as the ad explains, is 'the UK's leading integrated communications company' broadcasting ITV, Channels 4 and 5 and most UK independent radio stations to millions of homes; the third largest cable company; pioneers in the evolution of digital broadcasting and satellite services, and so on.

The position of the European Regulatory Affairs Manager is necessary because 'the rules and regulations which affect our business, for instance – on broadcasting policy, telecommunications liberalisation and electronic commerce, are made in Brussels rather than Westminster. It is vital to the long term success of our business that the rules adopted are sensible, proportionate and pro-competitive'. The person appointed will 'take a leading role in the regulatory community and will spend a significant amount of time lobbying directly in Brussels'.

If there was just one company doing this then maybe we shouldn't worry, but in fact the extent and scale of the effort which companies in media, telecommunications and computing fields are putting into ensuring favourable commercial policies is awesome. The key skills for the job include 'the ability to debate effectively with officials and MEPs, and to build alliances with other interested parties and lobby groups, will be essential'.

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→ from front page

compared to just seven identified in the White Paper, but one which drew Maurice Frankel's fiercest criticism was the exemption protecting safety information relating to public investigations into road, rail, air and ferry accidents, or chemical and nuclear incidents.

"This is an astounding proposal. It will keep the public in the dark about safety. It will encourage complacency by safety authorities," he said.

# Spinning above their weight

TIM GOPSILL

ALL GOVERNMENTS lie in wartime, as Philip Knightley wrote in "The First Casualty", the history of war reporting. But as wars go on, the lies are becoming, if not bigger, then louder. There has never been a conflict so geared to PR in its strategy and so dependent on PR for its success.

When in the first couple of weeks of the allied blitz on Yugoslavia, NATO was caught out lying over the massacre of Kosovar refugees on the road from Djakovica to Prizren, the organisation's response was not to tell the truth but apply more gloss to the lies.

The first rule of defensive PR, as any of the multitude of crisis management consultants will tell you, is: tell as much as you know of the truth and quickly; get it out of the way. But NATO instead chose to call on the services of Alastair Campbell, the UK government's chief spin doctor. He now spends three days a week in Brussels advising NATO on how to spin the war.

In Britain, the New Labour spin machine, which has successfully transformed the Labour Party from a political into a marketing operation, and can market such Thatcherite dreams as privatisation without significant dissent, believes it can get away with anything. And in this war it has had some success.

In military terms, the enterprise is a disaster that gets worse every day. The generals are gnashing their teeth in fury at the subordination of strategy to spin. Yet still NATO maintains, if not enthusiastic support, at least the compliance of popular opinion.

The well-established relationship between spinners and spinned against is central. Journalists have taken up the strange notions of "moral war" and a "humanitarian NATO", illustrated with carefully-managed photogenic images of the Blairs mingling with the refugees and all parties alternatively tearful or exultant, according to the requirements of the story in hand.

This is nothing surprising in itself; this is how they operate, and it can be for good ends. Cherie Blair went to the camps and wept to sell the policy switch, forced on the UK by the EU, to accept a decent number of Kosovars in Britain.

Of course it works. Those millions of people uncomfortable at being sold something that isn't quite what it appears must risk accusations of heartlessness, if not appeasement of fascism. Even more than in the Gulf War, the message is reinforced through the use of the word "Allies" to invoke the spirit of World War Two – a war universally regarded as just, though its resonance is sounding hollow with over-use.

It was a long time ago, and the spinners were able to disregard the folk memory of that war in Britain: the "spirit of the blitz", with which a nation sharply divided on class lines united under aerial bombardment behind the leadership of Churchill (and incidentally accepted heavy press censorship).

That this would happen in Serbia – along with other easily predictable consequences such as the stepped-up repression of the Kosovars and the tide of refugees – was either

not realised or could be discounted.

Two other British wars could provide more interesting parallels: the First World War, and the invasion of Suez in 1956.

At its outbreak there was no public appetite at all for World War One. It had to be sold to the public, by two means: firstly with bland assurances that it would be short and "sharp" – "over by Christmas 1914", they said – and secondly by a furiously racist campaign against the German people. This was when such standard propaganda lies as the slaughter of babies had their first outings.

Suez was a deranged imperialist adventure, conceived by the paranoid British Prime Minister Sir Anthony Eden on the professed grounds that Egyptian President Gamal Nasser was "another Hitler", to appease whom would lead to the collapse of the west. (The real reason was the disruption caused to the oil companies by Britain losing control of the canal. The result, of course, was much worse than paying dues to Egypt: the closure of the canal for 20 years.)

Just like now, there were major differences between Britain and the USA, which opposed the war and succeeded in stopping it. The difference is that in 1956 the liberal press was vehemently opposed to the invasion, and so was most of the Labour Party.

At the start of the current war the liberal press and the mainstream consensus was so embroiled in the spinning machine that they went along with it. Yes, there has been some good reporting in all the broadsheets, and the Independent on Sunday has broken ranks, and

yes, a few columnists are asking awkward questions.

But the consensus has not been disturbed. Opinion polls, those great standby stories when the press wants to stir up controversy, have mysteriously ceased to be conducted on the war since the end of April. All the reporting on Kosova is still coming from the refugee camps, and from Belgrade it is presented with "don't believe a word of this" health warnings that are unwarranted by the relative freedom in which the reporters there actually operate.

Where are the independent reporters, going around Serbia and Kosova to see for themselves? There are journalists from other European countries doing it. Why have no mainstream British media reported the true nature of the Rambouillet "accord" and the terms of occupation that Yugoslavia could not possibly, perhaps were not intended, to accept?

There is dissent in Britain, on left and right, in meeting halls around the country, and above all on the internet. The mainstream media have completely ignored it.

As the bombing disasters inevitably continue, you half expect the edifice to collapse at any minute. But collaboration between Downing Street spinners and political journalist is simply too deep.

So far, it's just been too easy to sell this war. Just how well they keep the lid on things if there is a land invasion and reporters start roaming around and seeing things for themselves remains to be seen. Remember Vietnam?

Speaking at a London Rally at Westminster Central Hall on 5 May CPBF organiser Barry White accused the broadcasting authorities of bias and self-censorship in reporting the Balkans conflict:



"The overwhelming tendency of news bulletins has been to concentrate on pictures of suffering, military hardware and of Nato generals giving briefings. The screens had not given anything like the attention to domestic opposition in Yugoslavia, to criticisms from the UK, mainland Europe and America of the dangers of the Nato strategy, or to critics concerned about the regional, humanitarian and ecological consequences of the war."

He called on viewers and listeners to write to the BBC and ITN about their war coverage and to MPs expressing concern about media coverage and the government manipulation of the media.

"We have to argue that the only way to build a truly democratic society is to have a media which is not grinding the axe of government or of big business. The terrible events in the Balkans remind us of the need to continue to campaign for media democracy, if we are to build a better world."

A NEW video has been launched which throws a disturbing new light on the war in Kosovo. The video, entitled "Stop the War" features footage of the horrific effects of NATO's bombing of Yugoslavia, never broadcast on British television. The video also shows the strength of the anti-war protest movement in Britain, as people from all parties demonstrate against the war.

Produced by Platform Films, makers of the acclaimed Channel Four series on the Labour Party "The People's Flag", the video paints a totally different picture of the war in Kosovo from the one shown in the national media.

The video is available from TV Choice, 22 Charing Cross Road, London WC2H 0HR. Tel 0171 379 0873 for more details.

## MEDIA MONITOR

### WORTH READING

The current issue of Index on Censorship, May/June 1999 is devoted to censorship in science.

Gregory Palast has an interesting, and disturbing article on the lengths to which Monsanto have gone to prevent publication of articles damaging to the company's commercial activities.

He cites the case of three University of Sussex scientists who received a floppy disc from Monsanto in October 1989 with date on cows injected with the hormone BST. The company had used data to show after a thirty week study cows had no harmful effects.

However the disc had data from over 50 weeks which showed that pus was dripping from the cows' udders when they were being milked.

When the scientists tried to publish their work based on this data three magazines, Veterinary Record, the Journal of Dairy Science and the British Food Journal all agreed to but backed down under pressure from Monsanto who claimed the data was confidential. The study remains unpublished.

Palast concludes that whilst editors will stand firm against government censorship the same editors 'will slash news reports, spike television productions or pulp entire journals based on a single note from Monsanto – or merely the fear of one'.

### WORLD PRESS FREEDOM PRIZE

The Mexican journalist awarded this year's World Press Freedom Prize confessed that he briefly considered leaving the profession.

Jesus Blancornelas, chief editor and co-founder of the Tijuana weekly newspaper, Zeta, barely survived an assassination attempt in November 1997 after being hit by four bullets in a revenge attack for his investigations into the drug underworld.

He thought about his family and the danger his job put them in. Then he thought again, "If I quit I'll be considered a coward. What's more the Mafia would make me an example for other journalists, telling them, 'See what happened to him, worse could happen to you.' That's why I decided to continue."

Blancornelas, 63, has not let up on his investigations of Mexico's drug gangs and the politicians they buy off, even though he said two \$80,000 bounties had been placed on his head.

He rarely goes out, shuttling almost exclusively between his office and home in the city on the US border, and is guarded round the clock by 10 soldiers.

## World press freedom day in Britain

THE CPBF joined other press freedom organisations for the first official British commemoration of World Press Freedom Day, with a meeting at the House of Commons. There were speakers from Zimbabwe and Serbia, as well as from a range of the media in the UK.

World Press Freedom Day, May 3, is a UNESCO event, and the UNESCO London office co-organised the meeting. Britain has just rejoined the UN culture agency 25 years after Margaret Thatcher joined the USA in a boycott of it in protest at its pro-Third World approach to the world information order.

Chaired by the CPBF vice-chair, Julian Petley, the meeting heard Mark Chavunduka, editor of

the Sunday Standard in Zimbabwe, tell how he had been arrested, tortured and charged with sedition for running a story about a failed military coup against the government of Robert Mugabe. He was in London, along with his colleague Ray Choto, for medical and psychiatric treatment after their ordeal.

Former Sunday Times writer Tony Geraghty told of repression of the press by the UK government. He had been subjected to a dawn raid by military police and was facing charges under the Official Secrets Act for publishing a book on the war in Northern Ireland, in which he had given information about computerised army intelligence operations.

Paul O'Connor, from the Oxford-based video collective Undercurrents, said journalists, particularly photographers and camera operators, covering environmental protests were being targeted by police, with frequent arrests and seizure of film. They were rarely charged; the aim was to get them out of the way and stop their film being shown.

The meeting was jointly organised with Article 19, Index on Censorship and the NUJ. Speaking for the NUJ, editor of the Journalist Tim Gopsill expressed the union's solidarity with colleagues facing repression around the world, and detailed the support given to them by the union.



PAUL O'CONNOR: police preventing coverage of direct action protest



MARK CHAVUNDUKA: tortured for running a story

# Export and die

GRANVILLE WILLIAMS

A RECENT report, *Building a Global Audience*, was produced by David Graham & Associates with the support of the commercial television industry (companies like Carlton, Granada and Pearson) and the government. Based on the report's findings Culture Secretary Chris Smith has now set up an enquiry into the issues identified in the report, and to identify how to make UK TV more exportable.

What this report, and the Green Paper, *Regulating Communications*, indicate are some of the trends in government thinking, and they are disconcerting. *Regulating Communications* was the joint product of the Departments of Trade and Culture, and the hand and influence of the former was clearly firmly on the tiller in guiding its progress and contents. That's why it devoted much more of its attention to delivery systems, and very little to the range and quality of what will be delivered in the digital age.

Similarly the Building a Global Audience project is a partnership of private sector investors and the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) and is financed by matched funds contributed by the commercial TV partners and the government. So far the project has cost £200,000.

The starting point of the report is a quote from Chris Smith's speech to the Royal Television Society in September 1997 about Britain 'producing the best radio and television in the world' and the need for the industry to work 'together to ensure British programming is in the best possible position to find overseas markets.' The report does reach some uncomfortable conclusions about whether Britain does produce 'the best television in the world', but also about the alarming trade deficit in television - £272 million in 1997. The

report concedes that this figure may not be accurate because of the way statistics on the audiovisual industry are compiled, but says the increase is due to the 'volume and value of imported programmes for new satellite and cable channels'.

However the long-awaited report by David Graham & Associates has been heavily trailed, and there is a clear sense of a coherent industry lobby which wants to see drastic changes in the regulation of UK commercial television and the place of public service broadcasting within this. The free-market business magazine, *The Economist*, began to pick up on these issues late last year when it argued 'ITV should be unbound and the BBC should be forced to shrink' and it repeated this view in an article on the global industry report (10.4.99). The *Economist* is of course part-owned by Pearson, one of the partners in the DTI project.

The report stresses heavily certain aspects of the failure of the UK television industry to defend and sustain its export record, but is silent on others factors which any objective analysis of the state of UK television should consider. The reason for this is that the report is concerned with television as a commercial commodity, and other considerations to do with social or cultural concerns are often seen as obstacles to creating and selling TV programmes overseas.

A key section of the report, *Competition and Regulation*, highlights the 'tension' and 'conflict' between the desire to produce programmes for export and to deliver programmes within the UK. 'UK regulation was designed to ensure high standards for British viewers, not to facilitate exports,' it points out. Content rules set by regulators shape the peaktime schedule and news, current affairs or regional coverage have

little or no export value compared to the main demand for imports around the world of high budget entertainment programmes.

It is clear that the thrust of the report's proposals, if they were realised in media legislation, would be to take a giant step towards a commercial light touch television structure with a much reduced requirement of public service broadcasting. The most devastating point though is that the authors acknowledge that the present system delivers high quality programming to different audiences. Indeed the regulatory structure, and the balance between licence fee and advertising funded television, is seen as a barrier. They are proposing dismantling this for some unproven global export drive.

There is the broader point. The report's authors keep quoting from commercial stations abroad which have strong reservations about the style and content of some of our drama, often describing it as too 'dark' or slow, too gritty or socio-political. Broadcasting should deal with and reflect the values of society, replaying back to us our history and diverse experiences, and sometimes these may not be attractive or easily exportable. Programmes like *Boys From the Blackstuff* or *Our Friends From the North* took great artistic risks, were popular, and rooted in particular social, political and economic experiences. One wonders what the treatment of them would be if the primary concern was to make them palatable to some ill-defined global audience. Or indeed whether they would ever get made.

*Building a global audience: British television in overseas markets*  
Broadcasting Policy Division, Department of Culture, Media and Sport  
2-4 Cockspur Street London SW1 SDH

three or four powerful corporations will dominate the global cable and telecommunications industries are not fanciful.

As Emily Bell, Observer Business Editor commented: 'Fewer and fewer people are pulling the strings in the world's most dynamic industry. Give it a couple of years and the heads of the world's biggest communications companies will be able to meet, well, in a telephone box. An international super regulator must now be a priority'.

series of takeovers and mergers in the United States where AT&T bought the cable giant TCI last year. In April this year AT&T merged with MediaOne in a £36 billion deal. The links between different telephone cable and media companies become ever more intricate with the spate of mergers, but the fate of the UK cable industry is bound up with these changes.

The worrying point is that we are seeing on a global scale the creation of a few multimedia companies. Predictions that

## Communications world keeps on shrinking

BILL GATES is on the move again. Microsoft has taken a 29.9 per cent stake in the UK's largest cable operator, Telewest.

Earlier this year he also acquired shares worth £305.5 million in a rival UK cable company, NTL.

With talks underway for a deal between Telewest and the other large cable operator, Cable and Wireless it now seems likely that there will be consolidation of the UK cable industry into one single company.

These changes form part of a wider

# Business is business for US Information Agency

*Propaganda Inc. Selling America's Culture to the World*  
Nancy Snow  
Seven Stories Press £3.99

THIS is the sixth publication in the Open Media pamphlet series - previous titles have been written by Robert W. McChesney and Noam Chomsky - and it casts a critical eye over an area of US activity which deserves more attention: the changed role and influence of the United States Information Agency (USIA).

An introductory section by Michael Parenti sets the tone, suggesting that the USIA, a 'benign-sounding unit of government supposedly dedicated to informational and cultural goals is actually in the business of waging disinformation wars on behalf of the Fortune 500'.

The author, Nancy Snow, is well-placed to write this disturbing dissection of the organisation's work because she has observed its operations from the inside. She cites a great deal of evidence to support her analysis that with the end of the cold war and the need to broadcast to the former Eastern bloc through Radio Liberty and Radio Free Europe, the USIA, the organisation moved into the export business on behalf of corporate America.

USIA Director Joseph Duffy said in 1993, "One of the most important areas for enhanced agency activity is that of business,

trade and economics. More and more, we are teaching others not only about the principles of free markets but the very mechanisms that make free markets and open trade possible."

This emphasis on US business and commercial values and interests has meant that the agency was active in promoting the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). Canada was particularly suspicious of the benefits of NAFTA, as a USIA document observed: 'Canadian opinion was quick to identify free trade with the erosion of national institutions and values, including corporations absorbed by American-dominated multinational as well as by cultural, media, and entertainment industries dominated by US products and control'.

The USIA devoted a good deal of energy to organise briefings and conferences to promote US government policies, and commented that these efforts 'were surely a positive factor in Canadian acquiescence to, if not great enthusiasm for, NAFTA'.

The enthusiastic promotion by the USIA of what the author calls 'the boardroom style globalisation model' is one which we need to be aware of, and link to more specific media policy issues. There are number of important insights into this neglected aspect of US activity which make it an informative and valuable publication.

## Don't hold the front page

THE March/April issue of Extra! (magazine of the US pressure group FAIR) has an article on the Washington Post and the United Nations weapons inspection team, UNSCOM.

The Post Reporter, Barton Gellman, revealed in a front-page article on 6 January 'convincing evidence' that the inspectors 'had collected eavesdropping intelligence used in American efforts to undermine the Iraqi regime'. The source for Gellman's story was 'advisors' and 'confidants' of UN Secretary General, Kofi Annan.

This story was published after December's bombing campaign against Iraq, but Gellman was in a position to publish the story in October. However at the behest of a senior US government official, he and the Washington Post's top manage-

ment chose not to reveal the extent of US intelligence's links to (and possible abuse of) UNSCOM for reasons of 'national security'. The newspaper chose to protect the operation from public scrutiny until it mattered less.

The paper seems to be continuing to adhere to the spirit of the Post's then publisher, Katharine Graham who spoke to a group of CIA officials in 1988 at the Agency's Langley headquarters: 'We live in a dirty and dangerous world. There are some things the general public does not need to know and shouldn't. I believe democracy flourishes when the government can take legitimate steps to keep its secrets and when the press can decide whether to print what it knows.'

GW

# Irish myths unmasked

*Rethinking Northern Ireland: Culture, Ideology and Colonialism*  
Edited by David Miller  
Longman £14.99

THIS is a welcome addition to David Miller's impressive efforts (*Don't Mention the War: Northern Ireland, Propaganda and the Media, 1994; War and Words: The Northern Ireland Media Reader, 1996*) in collating studies on previously neglected aspects of the Northern Ireland conflict.

The similarities in debate and reporting of the conflict, as he says in his introduction, have been 'more striking than the variations'. If at times the standard of the media's, and the Left's (*New Left Review* did publish a single article on Ireland between 1970 and 1994), coverage of Northern Ireland has been, in Miller's words, 'abysmal', he makes the point that the academic contribution has been worse.

There has been a distinct lack of an alternative view to 'the predominance of notions of tribal conflict and irrational or self-interested violence'. Most writing has been informed by 'British propaganda' or 'unionist ideology' and has left us with a 'seriously misleading and distorted view of the conflict in Ireland'.

Miller and his fellow academics redress the deficit with this excellent and much needed volume which attempts to 'reorientate our understandings' of Northern Ireland by 're-embedding the conflict in the history of and literature on imperialism and colonialism' - i.e. doing the kind of basic research and analysis which should have been in place 20 years ago.

As in the nature of such books, the wide-ranging articles on feminism, culture, unionism, nationalism and the economy vary in the quality of writing and content, but for anyone interested in media studies or Ireland the contributions of Mike Tomlinson on British collusion with loyalist paramilitaries, Liam O'Dowd's pessimistic look at 'New Unionism' and Miller's own on the role played by academics in perpetuating certain myths, are well worth investigating.

Stephen Dorril

## Conference and AGM

THE CPBF annual conference and AGM was held on 15 May. James Curran, Paul Evans (Carole Tongue's assistant) and Gary Herman of Labour Telematics opened up the first session outlining policy concerns and issues which the CPBF needed to address within the UK and Europe.

Maurice Frankel (Campaign for Freedom of Information) briefed the conference on the progress – or lack of – on FoI and gave an assessment of what was likely to be in the Bill to be published the following week. Tony Bunyan (Statewatch) dealt with the pressures to curtail a free flow of information within the European Union, and the work done by his organisation to challenge arbitrary decisions to curtail access to information.

Finally Tom O'Malley and Barry White introduced a discussion on priorities for the CPBF in the coming year.

# More killing secrets

FOLLOWING its launch in London in February (reported in FP109) the Killing Secrets campaign team has been working on several major projects and continuing their focus on building wide support for the campaign aims.


Killing Secrets is committed to controlling the activities of the arms trade and that requires innovation and challenging approaches.

With the war in the Balkans, it's even more important that the arms trade is held accountable for its activities and this makes transparency essential. The need to restock Nato armouries will put companies in a powerful political position and ensure them substantial profits in the years to come. Add to this the proposed Euro-Army and the

increased belief among western government that wars can stop wars and the future is looking rosy for weapons manufacturers.

Hot off the press is the Killing Secrets wall-chart "The Top 100 people in the British Arms Trade" – a must for anyone who would like to know more about this secretive sector of UK society.

Send £1 to help with post and packaging. Other projects include a Killing Secrets report on high street banks and the arms trade, expected this month and a road show which kicks off in July.

 The Campaign can be contacted at  
PO Box 12, Cumbria CA5 3GD.

Tel/fax 016973 23705.

Email: [killsecrets@msn.com](mailto:killsecrets@msn.com)

A Campaign website is being prepared.



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