

FREE Press

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Journal of the Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom

IT WAS ALMOST TWENTY YEARS AGO TODAY ...

IN SEPTEMBER 1979 at a TUC fringe meeting in Blackpool the CPBF was launched.

The next issue of Free Press will attempt an assessment of our work as a media pressure group over two decades, and we are expanding it to take four

pages of advertising from affiliates and other organisations. So if your organisation would like to take an advert, details of the rates and sizes are on the back page.

We also want to make FP112 a memorable issue. If you have any ideas

for items or you'd like to contribute to the 20th anniversary issue please get in touch. We want to get the issue printed ready for wide distribution at the TUC in Brighton which is from 13-17 September. It means we'd like all material and ads in for Friday 27 August.

FREEDOM OF INFORMATION

MAKE SURE YOU GET YOUR VIEWS ACROSS

IN THIS issue we carry a summary of the CPBF response to the draft Freedom of Information Bill introduced by the Home Secretary, Jack Straw, in the House of Commons on 24 May.

We literally gave an instant response to the Bill in FP110 and since then we have had the time to consider the Bill in more detail, and find out why it differs so radically from the promises and proposals contained in the White Paper, *Your Right to Know*, published in December 1997.

Put simply, those ministers, advisers and civil servants who are opposed to the basic idea of freedom of information got the upper hand, and the result is a pitiable Bill. Indeed it's so bad that there's a debate about whether it's even possible to resurrect it as a meaningful piece of freedom of information legislation.

In its present form it actually will not assist people to get access to information from central government and a range of regulatory authorities. It drastically downgrades the Information Commissioner's powers to gain access to documents, and allows bodies to refuse information based on the status or motives of the requester.

The response to the Bill has been strongly hostile. Indeed what has been

striking is the angry reaction of normally patient and mild-mannered campaigners for this legislation. The pledges of the Prime Minister at the Freedom of Information awards in 1996 were for a new start in politics, and robust freedom of information legislation, but this Bill definitely doesn't fulfil any of those pledges.

At this stage we don't know what the



Full marks for nerve: Jack Straw with his consultation document at the Campaign for Freedom of Information awards ceremony in June

government will do. There is talk that, in preparation for the next election, the Labour government wants to clear time for a legislative programme that will deliver votes in the next Parliamentary session. A Freedom of Information Act won't feature in this programme because many ministers cynically think it's only important to the

chattering classes and Guardian readers.

We don't want to second-guess the government's plans. At this stage we're into good, old-fashioned campaigning mode, and that means letting MPs know what our feelings are about the Bill.

We are holding a joint meeting with the Campaign for Freedom of Information at the TUC in Brighton, and want to mobilise the maximum resistance there and at the Labour Party conference too.

We urge all our members to do all they can through their trade unions, political organisations and as individuals to ensure that the Bill is either drastically revised or dropped.

Remember one simple and shameful point: if the Bill were to go forward in its present form it would replace the Conservative government's Code of Access which actually provides more

openness. It would be a retrograde and reprehensible step.

The date for responses to consultation on the Bill has now passed but you might also like to send copies of any letters to MPs also to Stephen Winter, Freedom of Information Unit, Home Office, 50 Queen Anne's Gate, London SW1H 9AT.

How the media failed us over NATO's war

BARRY WHITE

NATO's 11 week bombing war is over, for the time being at least. The war of words over the media coverage of the events in the former Yugoslavia is, however, gaining momentum. The debate was already under way when Alistair Campbell, who with NATO spokesperson Jamie Shea, fought to keep public opinion behind the war, spoke out on the communications lessons learnt from the conflict.

It was an unusual move by the government's chief propagandist who normally operates out of the shadows. Sections of the media responded with anger to his attacks on journalists reporting from inside Serbia and Kosovo. Obviously it wasn't good enough to have editorial support from the entire national press (the Morning Star the only exception) together with a similar line-up on Sundays, with only the Sunday Independent offering a different point of view.

By the time Campbell had made his speech on 9 July, Jamie Shea's claims about the success of NATO bombing, which had been uncritically reported by the media, were looking shaky. On 5 May he claimed that 'two thirds' of Yugoslavia's MIG-29s were destroyed. But on 12 June media coverage of the Yugoslav Air Force's departure from the Slatina airbase showed 11 of the original 14 leaving the airbase intact.

Writing in The Times on 24 June, defence editor Michael Evans said that 'NATO's 79-day bombing campaign against Yugoslavia, which involved thousands of sorties and some of the most sophisticated precision weapons, succeeded in damaging only 13 of the Serbs' 300 main battle tanks in Kosovo. He pointed out that 'it was claimed that up to 60% of Serb artillery and mortar had been hit and about 40% of the Yugoslav army's main battle tanks had been damaged or destroyed. When the Serbs finally withdrew

from the province at least 250 tanks were counted out, as well as 450 armoured personnel carriers and 600 artillery and mortar pieces', adding that 'it is virtually impossible to spot a destroyed tank'.

Another eye-witness, The Independent's Robert Fisk, pointed out on 21 June that 'NATO killed far more Serb civilians than soldiers during its 11-week bombardment of the country and most of the Yugoslav Third Army emerged unscathed from the massive air attacks on its forces in Kosovo'.

It was the reporting of journalists like Fisk and John Simpson that Campbell presented as propaganda for the Serbs, yet at the same time he claimed that 'it was vital to try to hold the public's interest on our terms'.

In a pamphlet produced by the CPBF at the end of the Falklands War we concluded that 'Media coverage of the Falklands war was not essentially different to anything else. It was awful, perverse, sensational, inaccurate, distorted, and served the political needs of the people who own and control the media ... so what else is new?'

As time goes on it will become clear that as during the Falklands and the Gulf conflicts, Britain does not have a free media. It will show that the media failed because it chose not to defend its supposed role as the watchdog of a democratic society, for a variety of reasons. It failed because it was deliberately misled by the government and because many journalists were prepared to go along with the spin. It failed because of the nature of the ownership and control of the media and the weakness of our media unions. The need to challenge the monopoly ownership and control of the media and campaign for genuine diversification of the industry has never been greater.

■ CPBF is approaching publishers to see if there is any interest in producing a collection of essays on media coverage of the war.

Will your local rag follow horse drawn cabs to knackers yard?

'EVERY time a new medium has come along, the death of the newspaper has been announced; yet newspapers are still with us. They survived radio, they survived the enormous visual and emotional power of television; and, financially, the industry is in relatively good health right now.'

This is the good news which a chunky feature in The Economist (17 July) then begins to dispel, using statistics from Europe and the USA to demonstrate the serious damage the Internet is doing to the newspaper business.

It highlights the following key factors, and of course not all of them are to do specifically with the Internet.

Demographics A media usage study by the American Society of Newspaper Editors found that in 1977 67% of the population read a newspaper; 20 years later the figure had fallen to 51%.

Competition There are more and more ways of occupying people's leisure hours.

But the Internet will, the article argues, unbundle 'the package of content and revenue that makes up a newspaper ... A newspaper is a bundle of goods and revenue streams brought together to amortise the cost of a printing press, and to pay for newsprint and a distribution network. The goods are the different editorial sections, stock prices, the weather forecast; the revenue streams are classified advertising, display advertising, promotions and the cover price'.

Classified advertising on the Internet will be one of the biggest threats and the bit of the bundle most vulnerable to the Internet. 'Print-based business are likely to shrink and for lots of local newspapers, heavily dependent on classified advertising, there may be no solution at all: they may vanish, like horse drawn street-cars, from the scene,' the article concludes.

Technological determinism gone mad or profound prediction? Watch this space.

For public service broadcasting read 'broadcasting with public purposes'

TOM O'MALLEY

JOHN Birt, the Director General of the BBC, steps down in 2000. He has been near, or at the centre of power at the BBC since 1987. The early phase of his BBC career was under the leadership of the Thatcher orientated Chair of BBC Governors, Marmaduke Hussey.

Hussey was appointed to shake the BBC up and to make it behave more like a commercial organisation. Birt went on to oversee the introduction of an internal market, a rhetoric of consumerism, and a willingness to do major deals with cunning rivals like Sky. He also diverted scarce BBC resources into the expansion of the BBC's digital services. All of these moves have proven controversial.

On July 6, 1999 he made a plea for more money for the BBC, when he delivered the New Statesman Media Lecture. He attacked Sky over gateway access to digital services. Sky's dominance over the technology needed to decode incoming digital signals gives it the ability to filter audiences towards its preferences, by dint of the way it sets up initial programme menus.

Birt argued for clear regulatory principles here, and for 'a prominent position of the BBC on every gateway in the UK'. He also asserted that the BBC would remain a global force in which 'programmes of excellence will need to be at the centre of everything we do'.

He looked forward to a digitopia full of a vast number of viewing and listening choices. The downside of this, he thought, was that so many channels might weaken social cohesion, because we will all be watching different things. He overlooked the fact that these choices are likely to be provided by a small number of companies who will be interesting in promoting a form of cohesion that underpins their

commercial activities.

He said nothing about involving the public in the future governance of the media or the BBC. He defined participation as the ability to vote from home on an issue raised in the BBC current affairs programme, Question Time.

Birt insisted that the BBC needed more money. Well, not quite. He wants a more 'buoyant funding regime'. How do you decode that? Well, it means more money is needed, but it is not a clear commitment to raising it from the licence fee.

But more money to do what? To promote public service broadcasting? No. That phrase gets pushed to one side by a new definition. The BBC is 'broadcasting with public purposes'. The BBC must remain a publicly funded body with public purposes'.

What then are the 'other purposes' of the BBC? It seems reasonable to suppose he means that the BBC will have to act like a commercial operator with public purposes tagged on. But how long before the other purposes, the commercial ones, take over?

In talking like this Birt was, implicitly, articulating the retreat from the idea of a general public service remit for all broadcasters which has gradually come to dominate broadcasting policy since the late 1980s. But he has also raised a question mark over whether the BBC is a public service broadcaster or a broadcaster with 'public purposes'.

This is a very important shift in the way of thinking about the BBC and broadcasting. Like so much else that is going on in media policy today, it cries out for public scrutiny. If the present Labour government has the principles and the nerve, it will hold an open, major inquiry into the media, rather than leaving it until we've got broadcasting with some public purposes, but no public service broadcasting.

Dyke the asset stripper?

GREG Dyke the newly appointed DG at the BBC could go down in history as the BBC's biggest asset stripper, if heavily trailed leaks of the report of the BBC Review Panel are to be believed.

A report in the Sunday Times on 18 July states that the panel will recommend the £200 million sell-off of BBC resources, which employs more than 4,000 staff. A 49% stake of BBC Worldwide will also be sold off to raise an estimated £250 million.

In addition there is to be an extra licence of between £20 and £30 for digital viewers. The ordinary licence fee, currently at £101 could be increased to around £110 by April 2002.

It is understood that Greg Dyke is aware of the proposals which have been seen by government.

The panel, chaired by Gavyn Davies, will be considering the final draft as FP111 goes to press and an announcement is expected early in August at the latest, but after Parliament has risen on 27 July.

The CPBF submitted evidence to the panel, which was published in FP109. If well-placed leaks turn out to be correct, Dyke is likely to be in conflict with the media unions who will oppose the sell-off. We'll have a fuller report in the next FP 112.

Commons committee to quiz funding

THE Culture, Media and Sport Committee will be taking evidence this autumn for its inquiry into the funding of the BBC. The inquiry follows the report of the review panel chaired by Gavyn Davies, reported above.

Written evidence is invited from all organisations and individuals. All written evidence must be received by Monday 1 November. The Committee also plans to take oral evidence in November and December and publish a report before Christmas.

Further details about the inquiry, please contact Colin Lee, Clerk of the Committee on 0171 219 6120.

Mandelson book withdrawn after libel

JOURNALIST and freelance writer John Booth has won his libel action against Donald Macintyre, the author of a recent biography about Peter Mandelson, and the publishers Harper-Collins.

The action related to the book's account of John's period as chief press officer for the Labour Party in 1986 under Peter Mandelson, the party's director of communications.

The publishers said in a statement on 20

July: "Harper-Collins and Donald Macintyre have confirmed that the libellous statements were untrue and have apologised to John Booth. The book has been withdrawn from sale."

John, who spoke at the CPBF's London meeting on 'spin' in March, felt he had no choice but to take legal action after the offending paragraphs were drawn to his attention.

CPBF RESPONSE TO THE FREEDOM OF INFORMATION BILL

Feeble, flawed, and it's weaker than existing code

This is an edited version of CPBF evidence to the Home Office in response to the publication of the Freedom of Information Bill

WE BELIEVE that the draft Freedom of Information Bill is fundamentally flawed, and this submission is part of our broader efforts to alert organisations and individuals about our concerns, and to seek basic changes to the Bill.

THE BILL: CONTENTS AND RESPONSES

A brief perusal of the Bill demonstrates a credibility gap between the claims made by the Home Secretary when he introduced the Bill in the Commons on 24 May, 1999, and the substance of it. "The proposals will benefit everyone and provide access to the sort of information that people really want to know," the Home Secretary said.

We fundamentally disagree. The Bill repudiates the basic rationale for freedom of information legislation which is that information across a range of public activities should be available to individuals and organisations unless there is clear evidence that disclosure would be damaging.

The Bill seeks to protect public bodies, restrict access, extend the number of exemptions, and in that sense should be renamed the Impediment of Information Bill.

The Bill proposes a lower test of "prejudice" rather than the "substantial harm" test in the White Paper, but then allows wide classes of information to be exempt from even this lower test. The Home Secretary asserted the legislation was "a radical and reforming measure, which will have a profound effect on the way public services operate," in his speech at the Freedom of Information awards on 7 June, 1999. But in reality it is a weaker set of proposals than those currently in operation through the Code of Access past by the Conservative government.

Even the powers of the Information Commissioner are severely weakened. Under the Bill the Commissioner will be prohibited from ordering disclosure, and if an authority does not provide information the Commissioner will only be able to rebuke it. In broad terms we endorse the comments made about the Bill by James Cornford on behalf of the CFoI at the awards event on 7 June but there are specific concerns we wish to highlight.

As an organisation concerned about media freedom the CPBF is disappointed and amazed at some of the clauses. Take, for example Clause 25(2)(a)(iii) which means that under this exemption no information obtained during a safety investigation would be made available. Or unsafe industrial premises are protected from scrutiny under a separate provision. Clause 25 (2)(a)(vii) and (viii) For journalists, researchers and trades unionists responsible for health and safety issues this is a major weakness in the Bill.

As a result of inquiries into disasters such as the Kings Cross Underground station fire

we often learn that the authorities knew there was a problem, but the public did not. If there are problems with safety or risks which may affect public health, this Bill will reinforce rather than weaken access to information. The culture of secrecy will remain.

We have already mentioned Clause 28(1)(a) which effectively closes off access to information on the formulation of government policy. We think this is a powerful anti-democratic measure which flies in the face of the commitments made by Tony Blair when he pledged freedom of information legislation.

One of the most striking aspects of the response to the Bill was the level of disappointment and criticism it received in most of the national press. The Economist, 29 May, was particularly scathing, describing the Bill as "a mockery of more open government" and "riddled with loopholes which would give Britain one of the feeblest information laws in the world."

More broadly it is difficult to find other organisations which have welcomed the Bill. One, however, is the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) which, in spite of the recommendation by the Macpherson report into the death of Stephen Lawrence that the Police Service "should be open to the full provisions of an FoI Act", the police are excluded as a regulatory authority. It means information obtained during police investigations will not be available as a right under the Bill.

Finally the Bill seems to be designed to make life difficult for people who want to gain access to information. The Bill extends the time given for a response to a request from 20 days in the White Paper to 40 days. Great weight is also placed on the discretionary release of information by authorities. Clause 14(c) This is strengthened by the Bill allowing the authority to insist on knowing why the applicant wants the information and what he or she intends to do with it, or may release information on condition the applicant agrees not to make it public.

There is also no statutory duty to help requesters to find the information they want, or when information is denied to explain the reasons for this to the requester.

Freedom of Information and the Democratic Process

A strong and effective of Act would begin to have a dramatic effect on British democracy. British government and administration is riddled with obsessive secrecy, and national security is invoked to avoid scrutiny of government activity whilst business invokes commercial confidentiality to deflect investigation or criticism.

While the public has restricted access to information more and more information about the public is being compiled on computers controlled by credit agencies, private firms, the police and other public authorities. We need Freedom of Information to ensure the public and private sectors are obliged to explain the decisions they take.

One of the CPBF's other major concerns is the impact of the growing concentration and commercialisation of the media on the flow of information we need as citizens to make informed decisions. The traditional role of the press and broadcast media as 'watchdogs' and publicisers of commercial or political misdoings has been eroded. For example, the ITV current affairs programmes which made powerful contributions to this process - This Week, First Tuesday, World in Action - have disappeared to be replaced by docusoaps and 'infotainment'. It's also the case that newspapers and television stations are often part of much wider commercial media groups and what is often risky and costly investigative journalism becomes less attractive than other forms of media products which may be cheaper to produce, achieve higher ratings and don't run the risks of libel actions.

We believe that strong freedom of information legislation, whilst not a substitute for the traditional work of investigative journalism, can be a powerful boost for that important linkage between the media, politics and the democratic process.

The Bill as it stands may well lead to more openness at a local level - schools and hospitals, for example - where fewer of the exemptions apply, but central government, and the shaping of policy will be largely exempt. That's why it's a bad Bill, and one which will send a clear negative message to voters concerned about democratic rights and constitutional reform. It will also, unless it is drastically modified, become a reprehensible piece of legislation if it is given time in the next Parliamentary session.

We urge the Home Secretary to radically redraft the Bill.

Ethics on the web: Do we give a dot com?

BERNIE RUSSELL

THE recent furore over the posting of the names of active MI6 agents on the Internet has sparked off the usual debate about the need to control the Net. Two points need to be made. The first is the common sense one: the real issue in the Tomlinson case is how MI6 deals with disaffected agents. The Internet is an irrelevance.

In bygone days, an unhappy spook could have simply posted the names off to a few dozen foreign editors, with much the same result. The Internet made this sort of thing easier, but it didn't make it possible.

The second point is the more obvious one: you can't control the Internet. To quote an old Internet saying, the Net interprets censorship as damage and routes around it. This is not to say that the Internet doesn't need some kind of regulation. The question is, what kind, and by whom? For governments, the debate is about control. They want to know how they can erect global gateways that match, or, better still, surpass the national gateways through which printed information has to flow.

For publishers the debate is about technology. What can be done will be done, and they want to make sure they do it ahead of, or at least close behind, their rivals.

Yet surely the real issue at the heart of Internet publishing isn't the lack of control, or the surfeit of whizz-bangery. It's the lack of standards. There are virtually no professional, ethical or editorial standards governing the salaries and conditions, training, or career structure of Web authors and editors.

And the only people who can set standards are those who actually design, and write and mark-up copy for Web sites - that odd breed variously described as Webmasters, Web weavers, Web designers, HTML authors, content providers ... (even, occasionally, as journalists).

This is where the Jet Pilot project comes in. So far, little thought has been given to the impact of on-line and digital media on the job of the journalist by either unions or employers.

The Jet Pilot project is an attempt by journalism unions to address this; to try to develop standards based on journalistic values,

and on trade union and democratic values; and to incorporate those standards into training for journalists. Jet Pilot aims to resist the notion that Web writing is copy plus HTML, and that we can apply the same kinds of standards as apply to the printed media.

Take the simple case of hyperlinks. This is more than merely a matter of getting your HTML syntax right. What kind of links should you put in your story? Supposing you were doing a story on the abortion debate in the USA, and mentioned the Nuremberg Files Web site, which published the names and addresses of doctors working at abortion clinics in the USA? Would you put a link to the site in a story about the abortion

debate? Would you even put one into the story about the site itself? How would you decide? Who would decide? The writer? The sub? What about interviews? Would you link from the story to a transcript of the interview? That way, the readers could evaluate the material themselves. This might end the usual excuses about "being quoted out of context", but it would raise other issues, such as why write the interview up at all? Why not just post it on the site as text, or even an audio file? In which case, why get a journalist to do the interview?

These are merely two examples of a host of issues which are clearly to do with standards unique to the Internet.

These issues will have to be resolved if on-line media are not to damage or subvert the journalistic values on which readers and writers in all of our media depend.

And they ought to be resolved by journalists themselves through the widest possible debate. Starting now.

For more information about the Jet Pilot project visit the Web site at www.ifj.org/jetpilot or contact the UK project partner Gary Herman Email gherman@keywords.demon.co.uk Tel 0161 881 0672 Fax 0161 860 7746 Bernie Russell is a freelance writer, editor and Web designer, currently working on the Jet Pilot Web site.

WITHOUT COMMENT

I taped lobbyists describing in nauseating detail several back door meetings in the Treasury and PM's office on mergers, taxes and exemptions to environmental law.

With US-style FoI legislation I would have had cold verification of the meetings from ministerial diaries and file notes. The Lobbygate sword would have struck much deeper.

Greg Palast, who exposed Labour's lobbyists in The Observer

The Guardian, 20 July, 1999

Gannett ate my Newsquest!

GRANVILLE WILLIAMS

IT'S QUITE amazing really. It took less than a month for Newsquest to be gobbled up in a £90+ million take-over by the US media giant, Gannett.

If there was a real story about the nature of the Gannett group and the dramatic impact this will have on local and regional media, in England, it was this one. But apart from the straight reporting in the national press that it was going to happen, up to the time the deal was done there were just one or two mildly critical articles in the press, and that was it.

So why should we be concerned? Well let's start with Newsquest first. It's the largest publisher of regional newspapers in England, with 63 paid-for titles and 120 free. Its portfolio includes the Northern Echo, the Lancashire Evening Telegraph, the Bolton Evening News, the Oxford Mail and the Brighton Argus. Also with other regional newspaper groups, Trinity and Northcliffe, Newsquest is a partner in setting up local Internet sites under the 'This is ...' brand.

Newsquest itself was created out of the disposal by other media groups of their regional newspapers. Initially Newsquest was a £200 million management buyout of Reed Regional Newspapers from Reed Elsevier in January 1996, and the titles of Pearson's Westminster Press were added later that year for £300 million. The company was backed by the US venture capital backers, Kohlberg Kravis Roberts (KKR) and the two major shareholders in Newsquest with 51.73% of the shares were KKR and Cinven. Once they had decided to sell there was little the board could do to oppose it.

Regional newspapers have been consolidating rapidly, and the prices of some of the deals led KKR to look for a buyer. The Gannett deal means that in three and a half years KKR has made a return on its investment of 66%.

But what about the new owners of Newsquest? Well Gannett is the second largest newspaper company in the world in terms of circulation, just behind News Corporation and just ahead of Conrad Black's newspapers. In addition to its newspaper interests it also owns 21 television stations in the US and has cable interests in three States. But what gives Gannett its

dubious reputation (by the way the company likes the accent to be on the final syllable) is its fearsome dedication to the ever-increasing profitability of its newspapers. This trait was established by Al Neuharth who arrived at the company's Rochester headquarters in 1963 and in 1967 listed the company's shares on Wall Street.

Ben Bagdikian in *The Media Monopoly* describes how Neuharth met regularly with Wall Street analysts who question executives so they can give inside investment advice to important clients: 'During one meeting Neuharth was asked whether the corporate name should be pronounced GAN-nett or Gan-NETT. Neuharth smiled and said the correct pronunciation was MONEY.' According to one US analyst in 1997 the operating profit margin for newspapers as a sector was about 20% (double or more the

enterprise and block adequate coverage of the news in their communities.'

Gannett has political clout too – they are used to access in the USA to the highest level of policy decision making, and over the years have elaborately promoted a reputation as a defender of press freedom. In the 1970s, as the chain relentlessly expanded, complaints of monopolistic arrogance were countered with a series of celebration ads in newspapers and magazines using the Gannett slogan: GANNETT – A WORLD OF DIFFERENT VOICES WHERE FREEDOM SPEAKS.

Which brings us back to why we should be concerned about the Gannett take-over of Newsquest. Of course local newspapers in the UK have had their fair share of cost-cutting and job losses. Very few newspapers are now independent and locally owned; they are part of ever larger regional newspaper groups which will continue to consolidate as they generate more profits. Nonetheless many of the regional newspaper groups do realise that newspapers have to relate to local communities, and who owns them is important. Gannett newspapers have been criticised for their syndicated blandness – it makes financial sense to pay once for copy which you can replicate in all your titles but it doesn't add much information about your local community. Also the reliance on ad revenue means papers have to keep local advertisers friendly and avoid critical stories.

And yet, because of the regulatory structure Gannett, a new entrant into UK newspapers, can buy a major group without reference to the Department of Trade and Industry simply because the major shareholder, KKR, wanted to take its 66% profit and move on. This issue is not likely to go away now – Gannett will be hungry again once it

has digested Newsquest. According to the Financial Times (23 June), 'Media analysts said it was unlikely that a US newspaper giant with a market value of \$20.5 billion (£12.8 billion) would stop at one deal in Britain's rapidly consolidating – and highly profitable – regional newspaper industry.'

Which brings us back to the question we started with – why no debate on these issues or critical questions in Parliament about such a significant change in newspaper ownership?

TOP TEN UK REGIONAL NEWSPAPER PUBLISHERS

| | Titles | Weekly Circulation |
|----------------------------|--------|--------------------|
| Trinity | 117 | 8.2m |
| Northcliffe | 55 | 8.0m |
| Newsquest | 130 | 7.5m |
| Johnston | 166 | 6.0m |
| Mirror Group (Regional) | 45 | 4.0m |
| Regional Independent Media | 34 | 3.3m |
| Guardian Media Group | 37 | 2.8m |
| Eastern Counties News | 54 | 2.7m |
| Newscom | 59 | 2.6m |
| Southnews | 49 | 2.5m |

Source: Newspaper Society

figure for US industry generally) but Gannett had pre-tax margin of 26.6%. Neuharth extolled his newspapers as 'a profit machine in good times and bad'.

As the chain expanded it did so by eliminating competition and building local monopolies. Ruthless tactics are used against independent competitors and all titles subject to relentless cost-control. Bagdikian writes 'most of the empire consists of vast silent domains where ruthless demands for ever-increasing profits crush journalistic

The media as a site for struggle

BOB HACKETT, CO-DIRECTOR, NEWSWATCH CANADA

SOME of the CPBF's driving concerns – especially the impact of media concentration and hypercommercialism on independent, balanced public affairs journalism – are the starting point for NewsWatch Canada, an ongoing research project by communications students and faculty at Vancouver's Simon Fraser University.

In 1993, as public broadcasting was cut back and Conrad Black's press empire was expanding (it now owns over half the country's dailies), the Canadian Association of Journalists initiated the project to explore potential blind spots – significant topics which are under-reported – in Canada's major English-language dailies.

Originally, we adopted the model of Project Censored in the USA, which each year identifies and publishes a list of spectacular stories published in the alternative press but virtually ignored in the dominant media.

While the Canadian lists were less dramatic, they nevertheless suggested subtle gaps in the news which are partly related to

corporate and commercial pressures. Switching from 'top 10 lists' to more systematic content analyses, we have so far identified the following as possible press blind spots:

- the extent of Canada's involvement in militarism
- environmental degradation as a systemic problem
- the perspective of French-Canadians outside Quebec on the never-ending language-rights debate
- religion and traditional social values
- human rights abuses by Canada's major trading partners
- white collar and corporate crime, which costs Canadians an estimated \$30 billion annually
- the power of the public relations industry
- poverty and class inequality
- the vested interests of media companies themselves.

Moreover on the op/ed (opinion/editorial) pages and as news sources, market liberal viewpoints (privatisation, free trade, and the like) are twice as frequent as

advocacy for social programmes or other positive economic roles for government. (By contrast, social liberalism outweighs traditional conservatism on moral issues, like abortion, which arguably impinge less on the 'corporate agenda')

Our studies also suggest that business news greatly outweighs labour news, and the discrepancy has increased in the past ten years.

Labour news tends to be about 'negative' events, especially strikes; business news covers a much wider range of topics. Labour spokespersons are much more likely to be counterbalanced by opposing sources.

NewsWatch's findings likely won't surprise British readers of *Free Press*, but in Canada we have helped to highlight the need for trade unions and social change advocates to take more seriously the media as a site for struggle.

For more on NewsWatch Canada's work see <http://newswatch.cprost.sfu.ca>

Email newswatch@sfu.ca, or watch out for our forthcoming book, *The Missing News: Filters and Blind Spots in Canada's Press*.

MEDIA MONITOR

On the growth of public relations, Cohen points out that there are now 25,000 PRs in Britain and 50,000 journalists, 'one persuader for every two mediators'. The dangers to democracy brought about by the concentration of newspaper ownership are reiterated (90 per cent of the national newspapers in circulation are controlled by five men).

'Bad journalism,' argues Cohen, 'is a consequence of an unregulated market in which would-be monopolists are free to treat the channels of democratic debate as their private property.' Enough said?

■ *Cruel Britannia* is published by Verso £16

GLOBAL LIMITS

A call to stop efforts to expand the powers of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) through a new comprehensive round of trade liberalisation has been launched by over 690 organisations from over 73 countries.

Instead governments should review and rectify the deficiencies of the system and the

WTO regime itself.

The call has come following the demise of the MAI (reported in FP109) and in the context of increasing global economic instability, the collapse of national economies, increasing inequity (both between and within nations), and increasing social and environmental degradation, as a result of accelerating globalisation.

The statement opposes any new further liberalisation negotiations, especially those which will bring new areas under the WTO regime, such as investment, competition policy and government procurement. It points out that the failure of the MAI demonstrated broad public opposition to the deregulation of the global economy, and the increasing dominance of transnational corporations.

Meanwhile the Department of Trade and Industry has launched a paper on international investment after the MAI. It's not a statement of government policy, but some early thoughts, according to Tom Smith, Head of International Investment Policy at the Department. In it a number of items are suggested for inclusion in the next round of WTO negotiations.

■ For further information about the international statement contact ronnieh@foe.co.uk

JOURNALISM MAG

February 2000 sees the launch of Journalism Studies, a new quarterly international journal. It will bring together teachers, researchers and journalists from around the world to provide a critical forum for the study of journalism. It will also explore a wide range of media within which journalism is conducted: radio, newspapers, magazines, television, multi-media and new technologies. Public relations, communications and advertising will also be examined.

The journal's three editors include Bob Franklin from the University of Sheffield, who writes in FP and often speaks at our public events. You can find out more by contacting Bob at the department of Sociological Studies, University of Sheffield, Elmfield, Northumberland Road, Sheffield S10 2TU

■ Email: r.franklin@sheffield.ac.uk

CRUEL COHEN

Cruel Britannia by Nick Cohen reports on the sinister and the preposterous in Blair's New Labour. He ruthlessly exposes them for carrying on much of the agenda of the former Tory government. His chapter on the media, 'The news is what we say it is' is one which should interest FP readers.

OBITUARY

Jim Allen

JIM ALLEN died after a long illness on June 24. Born in October 1926 his early life included working on building sites, the docks and down the mines. Younger readers will have come across the strength and commitment of Jim Allen's work through the Ken Loach directed film, *Land and Freedom*, the story of a Liverpool volunteer in the Spanish Civil war, or *Raining Stones*, the grim portrayal of life at the edge in Jim Allen's home town near Manchester.

But for those of a mature age, the sheer excitement of watching *The Lump and The Big Flame* in the Wednesday Play slot on BBC television in the mid-60s would be hard to beat. Here for the first time we got a real sense of working life for the casual labourer. Ken Loach, in his tribute to Jim Allen, highlighted the way he 'caught the rhythms, the vivid use of imagery, the jokes and phrasing of everyday speech'.

Politics was in his blood, and he brought to life crucial events of political and working class struggles, memorably in the four part *Days of Hope*, the story of three people from the Great War to the General Strike.

His world view, which distrusted the trade union bureaucracy and Labour and Stalinist politics, drew him into conflicts, and for periods in the 1970s and 80s he fell on hard times. The British Film Institute, which turned down one of his scripts then because 'people don't talk like that any more', might consider a retrospective. **GW**

CPBF
NEWSNEW AFFILIATIONS/
EVENTS

TWO NUJ branches – Carlisle and Brighton – joined the CPBF in June.

Also in June we had a successful fringe meeting at Unison Conference where Observer columnist Nick Cohen and Granville Williams spoke on the topic *Do You Really Want to Lose the News?*

We are running a joint CPBF/Campaign for Freedom of Information meeting at the TUC on Wednesday 15 September at 5.30pm. The venue is the Quality Hotel (formerly the Brighton Oaks) near the Conference Centre. There will be speakers from the NUJ, UNISON as well as Maurice Frankel from the CFoI.

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Free Press is edited by Granville Williams for the National Council

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