

ONE LAST PUSH

FoI BILL MUST BE CHANGED

EARLY in April the Freedom of Information Bill reached its report stage. Richard Shepherd, a Conservative MP with a long-standing commitment to freedom of information, recently described the government's bill as 'truly wretched'. He also said that unfortunately he had not had a single letter from his constituents complaining about the bill. He partly blamed the media for this lack of interest, and it is the case that apart from *The Guardian* no national paper has actively campaigned for effective FOI legislation. Why? Don't the editors and proprietors care about the issue, or do they prefer things the way they are?

The bill is dire. The Campaign for Freedom of Information says it 'is biased against disclosure to a remarkable degree. Some of the failings are so extraordinary that no-one would have believed that they could be found in an FOI bill at all.' The bill's worst aspects include:

Information about dangers to public safety will be exempt, including information about the falsification of nuclear safety test results by BNFL, railway crashes like the Paddington accident, abattoirs which fail to comply with BSE regulations, restaurants responsible for food poisoning outbreaks, car dealers selling dangerous cars and similar matters. Safety authorities could even refuse to confirm or deny whether they hold such information.

The facts on which government policies are based will be exempt. Ministers will not have to reveal the research, statistics, cost data or opinion polls on which decisions

are based. They are not even required to say whether such information exists.

Ministers and authorities breaking the law or acting negligently or complacently will themselves decide whether it is in the public interest to reveal this. The independent Information Commissioner will only be able to recommend, not require, disclosure on public interest grounds.

Before the election Tony Blair promised an FOI bill that would 'signal a new relationship between government and people.' The CFI's director, Maurice Frankel, says, 'No-one would have believed Mr Blair was referring to a bill as feeble as this - or that provisions like these could form part of an FOI bill at all.'

Two essential changes are needed to ameliorate the worst aspects of this shabby piece of work:

Blanket exemptions should be removed. Authorities should not be able to withhold information unless they can show disclosure would be harmful.

The Information Commissioner should have the final say on when disclosure is in the public interest - not ministers and authorities who may have something to hide.

One last determined effort is needed to stiffen resistance to the bill amongst MPs. If they don't think anyone is bothered, they aren't going to be either. Write to your MP urgently asking them where they stand on this vital issue.

The CFI website is:
www.cfi.demon.org.uk

DIG DEEP

We have planned an ambitious programme of activity over the next couple of years. The focus for it is the stated intention of the government to introduce a Broadcasting Bill into the first session of Parliament after a general election.

For the CPBF the content of such a bill is a vital matter, and that's why we want to exert the maximum effort, mobilise opinion, and ensure that our policy concerns are at the centre of the legislation.

Our plans include:

- launching a public enquiry into the future of broadcasting
- holding a major conference to debate government policy once the White Paper is published in Autumn 2000
- producing a popular, campaigning pamphlet explaining our ideas and concerns on broadcasting policy issues (see Tom O'Malley's piece in this issue)
- maintaining an active lobbying presence in Parliament during the passage of the Broadcasting Bill, and working closely with other organisations sharing our broad concerns

We are realistic though. It won't be an easy job. The big hitters in the media industry - Rupert Murdoch, Granada's Gerry Robinson, United News and Media's Lord Hollick - have easy access to the heart of government. However we know that a wide range of individuals and organisations share our disquiet about this, and want to develop public awareness and participation in shaping media policy guided by democratic principles rather than commercial interests.

If we are to succeed **CASH** is vital to realise our ambitious plans - £76,000 is our target. We've made a good start and raised one third of that amount already. We will be approaching other sources for funds too, but we want to make a direct appeal to our members and supporters to help us raise the money.

Please make a personal donation or get support through your trade union or political organisation to send us some cash.

Geoff Mason
CPBF Treasurer

Apart from *The Guardian* no national paper has actively campaigned for effective FOI legislation. Why?

Don't the editors and proprietors care about the issue, or do they prefer things the way they are?

Government targets journalists as renegade spy stays out of reach

TIM GOPSILL

HOME Secretary Jack Straw has precipitated a confrontation with the liberal press by having court orders imposed on The Guardian and Observer over their contacts with renegade MI5 agent David Shayler.

The Central Criminal Court in London granted orders under the Police and Criminal Evidence Act (PACE) against both papers, and individually against Observer

reporter Martin Bright, on March 17.

The orders require The Guardian to produce the original of an email letter from Shayler it published in February.

Those against the Observer and Bright require them to produce all notes and computer files relating to contacts the reporter had with Shayler before writing a story alleging that Shayler has sent the British government details of the MI6

involvement in the plot to assassinate Libyan ruler Muammar Gaddafi in 1996. This information contains the names of the two MI6 agents involved in the plot. The Observer did not publish the details. They all have 21 days to comply but are appealing.

The Guardian material (the letter) is in the public domain. What the spooks say they want is Shayler's email address. This address is on his website – www.shayler.com – which is well-known to and frequently accessed by journalists and many other people. The Guardian obligingly published it the day after the court order was issued. (It is david@shayler.com) If the spooks don't know it they are even more bungling and stupid than their reputation allows.

All the material reported by the Observer has been sent to Straw by Shayler, who says he wants the government to act on it. In other words, there is no information the state does not already have. Shayler, who lives in Paris where he hosts a continuous stream of visitors, will tell anybody who asks. He probably stops people and tells them in the street.

But the Brits can't get at him. An application for extradition was refused by the French courts on the grounds that the Official Secrets Act case against him was political, a reasonable argument that drove MI5 to fury.

So instead they are hitting out at anyone who has contact with him. A Surrey student, Julie Ann Davies, was arrested in early March and questioned about a possible charge.

Straw has initiated a copyright action against the Mail on Sunday, which printed some of his stuff last year, claiming Shayler had breached crown copyright. This is not just crazy but even legally dubious.

MI5 is nominally accountable to the Home Office and MI6 to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO). There have been reports that Foreign Secretary Robin Cook and his minister of state Peter Hain (the minister responsible for dealing with Libya) are furious with Straw over his precipitate action. Cook is particularly incensed because MI6 misled him into believing there was nothing in Shayler's allegations when they first surfaced.

Hain has told journalists of his anger and the NUJ, which is mounting a campaign to defend its member Martin Bright, has challenged the minister to go public.

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although executive councils are not going to be widespread until after the Bill is enacted next year.

The indefatigable Maurice Frankel says it is another example of the government weakening existing public rights rather than improving them.

Local papers have been criticising council cabinets which exclude the press or public from meetings, and mounting campaigns for change. The Derby Evening Telegraph has just won a long fight with the council to open its executive meetings; in Newcastle, the Evening Chronicle highlights the fact that ten of the 78 councillors sit in closed single-party cabinet meetings. A survey by the Society of Editors in northern England revealed that of thirteen council cabinets already operating, seven are not open to press or public.

of Trade and Industry as well as local authorities, to undertake covert surveillance.

The bill requires internet service providers to siphon off internet traffic into government computers and provide detailed traffic analysis.

Anyone failing, when legitimately asked, to give up an encryption key giving privacy to their mail would be the presumed guilty.

Caspar Bowden, of the Foundation for Information Policy Research, says powers in the bill to decode encrypted e-mails will lay the government open to human rights challenges. He pointed out Britain would become 'the only country in the world to publish a law which could imprison users of encryption technology for forgetting or losing their keys'.

Councils to go under cover

THE preface to an excellent document, *The Public's Right to Know: Principles of Freedom of Information Legislation* published by Article XIX, the anti-censorship group, says this:

Information is the oxygen of democracy. If people do not know what is happening in their society, if the actions of those who rule them are hidden, then they cannot take a meaningful part in the affairs of that society. But information is not just a necessity for people – it is an essential part of good government. Bad government needs secrecy to survive. It allows inefficiency, wastefulness and corruption to thrive.

Wise words, so it is curious that the Local Government Bill, which calls for Westminster-style cabinet government, could lead to greater secrecy and less public scrutiny of councils. Many Labour councils are switching to this system,

Jack unleashes the cyber spies

HOME Secretary Jack Straw's illiberal instincts don't stop at freedom of information. He introduced the Home Office Regulation of Investigatory Powers (RIP) bill in February. The Financial Times described it as a bill that 'would give the authorities more intrusive powers than in any other western democracy'.

The bill is intended to update rules on surveillance to cope with modern technology. It covers a range of intrusive surveillance techniques, including targeting an individual over a period of time 'to obtain a picture of his life, activities and his associates'.

Ministers will be able to issue orders allowing many agencies, including the Departments of Health and Social Security, the Ministry of Agriculture, the Department

MEDIA MONITOR

THE INSIDER

The Insider, directed by Michael Mann, is worth seeing. The theme of the film, investigative journalism versus corporate power and interest (both from the tobacco and media industries) might seem a worthy but dull theme for a film. This one however has the same power and impact as Alan J. Pakula's *All The President's Men* (1976).

Both films also prompt thoughts about the insights they give us into the US media. Dustin Hoffman and Robert Redford play the roles of Bernstein and Woodward, investigative journalists on the Washington Post, as they delve into the murky Watergate affair. The book they wrote, and the film based on it, inspired thousands of students that this was the sort of positive role they could aspire to in journalism.

Al Pacino plays the part of investigative reporter Lowell Bergman in *The Insider*, working for the CBS news and current affairs programme *60 Minutes*. He wants to use the testimony of a former top scientist with tobacco company Brown and Williamson for a story. The film deals with real events (we covered them in *Free Press* at the time) and the way CBS pulled the story, bowing to corporate pressure, has Bergman angrily saying Ed Murrow will be turning in his grave.

Edward R Murrow pioneered television current affairs journalism with *See It Now* in the 1950s. He resisted any commercial pressures to censor or ignore controversial stories, and indeed dealt in two programmes with the links between smoking and cancer. This was at a time when tobacco companies were amongst the biggest advertisers on the television networks. Murrow himself smoked eighty cigarettes a day and died of lung cancer, but the CBS network he worked for in the 1950s had changed totally by the 1990s, as *The Insider* vividly illustrates.

TRASH TV

In FP 114 we reported on the rash of quiz shows on US television, inspired by the UK's *Who Wants To Be A Millionaire?* Well, Rupert Murdoch's Fox TV went one better with the brainchild of a Fox TV executive, Mike Darnell. He has a dubious record, with past special programmes having titles such as *When Good Pets Go Bad* and *Alien Autopsy*. However his latest idea seemed a winner in one sense – over twenty million viewers watched *Who Wants to Marry a Millionaire?*

The programme idea brought outraged comment from a range of individuals and organisations, as 50 female contestants willingly subjected themselves to a kind of

cattle market auction, to be selected as the bride for Rick Rockwell. The whole tacky episode descended into tawdry farce when a tiny 'e-zine', *The SmokingGun.com*, delved into Rockwell's past and found that far from being a millionaire, he's an unsuccessful comic under a restraining order for violence against a former girlfriend.

The Fox network, which for over a decade has plumbed the depths pioneering the highly profitable and perverse genre of so-called 'shockumentaries', now says it has finished with them.

Unfortunately other networks are getting the habit, with CBS planning two shows which take ideas from European TV. One has contestants stranded on a desert island competing for \$1 million and the other, *Big Brother*, has volunteers living in a house full of cameras and microphones.

One commentator thinks it is just good PR by Fox, but they will be back because the competitive pressures are too great to abandon the field: 'Next year I bet all the Fox, CBS and NBC spin-offs, even *Who Wants to Marry a Multimillionaire*, will probably look classy,' he predicts.

WITHOUT COMMENT

Whether or not they should have been, neither case could have been brought in the United States, not since an historic judgement a quarter-century ago. A broad public-interest defence was extended so that it is very difficult for a public figure – which plainly includes the ITN reporters and Irving – to sue for libel...

The best outcome of these wretched proceedings would be a reform of the law. It is too much to hope that the burden of proving the falsehood of a statement should be placed on the plaintiff. But there should be a much broader public-interest defence, and the law of libel – written defamation – should be assimilated to the law of slander, spoken or fleeting defamation, in which the plaintiff has to prove actual damage or material loss.

Geoffrey Wheatcroft on the David Irving and ITN libel trials. The Guardian, March 18, 2000

LETTER

Palast did have chance to put view to Neill

Dear Free Press
I was disappointed to read that Greg Palast felt the Neill Committee had not given him the chance to testify.

The Neill Committee looked at lobbying as part of its review of the First (Nolan) Report. Early in March 1999 it published an *Issues and Questions* paper which asked for views on, among other things, lobbying. Many submissions were received before the 10 May 1999 deadline. At public hearings in June and July the Committee heard from witnesses with an interest in lobbying issues as they affect NGOs, as well as groups representing commercial lobbyists, MPs and academics. This amounted to a good public airing of the issues.

Greg Palast's written evidence about lobbying of government reached us on 18 August – well after the end of the public hearings and three months after the deadline

for submitting evidence. He also asked for an individual oral hearing, referring to the existence of further detailed evidence. The Committee was not able to agree to this, partly because the deadline was well past, and partly because it cannot investigate individual allegations of misconduct.

The Report did discuss lobbying at length, recommending much better recording of lobbying contacts by both Ministers and officials, but rejecting a lobbyist register. A register would not help to regulate what we – like Mr Palast – regard as the prime area of concern, the lobbied in government. Some of Mr Palast's evidence was quoted in the Report.

Mr Palast may not agree with the Committee's conclusions, but he did have the chance to put his view.

Philip Aylett
Press Secretary, Neill Committee

THE INTERNET – EXTENDING PRESS FREEDOM?

A debate to mark World Press Freedom Day 2000

Wednesday May 3 • Cyberia Café, Whitfield St, London W1

Tim Pearson *Internet Service Provider's Association*

Roger Darlington *Internet Watch Foundation*

Madeleine Bunting *Guardian journalist*
Yaman Akdeniz *Cyber Rights and Cyber Liberties*

Chair: **Sheena McDonald**

The event will also feature contributions from ANEM, the Independent Broadcasters' Association in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and others around the world who use the Internet to get around media censorship. Entry is free but seats are limited • Contact info@article19.org for information and to attend. Organised by Article 19, Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom, Index on Censorship and the NUJ

New Labour and spooks set to repeat Spycatcher mistakes

STEPHEN DORRIL

THIS may be an appropriate moment to publish a book on the intelligence services because of the numerous cases currently in the press, but it also a deeply worrying time for authors and journalists, who are increasingly having to look over their shoulder for fear of a call from the Special Branch.

The government, and a Labour government at that, has launched a highly visible crackdown on journalists and writers who cover the security and intelligence field. In recent months there has been an increasingly aggressive campaign to prevent coverage of the numerous allegations concerning illegal activities and incompetence made by defectors from the secret state. We are witness to the continuing hounding through the courts of David Shayler (ex-MI5) who is exiled in Paris, and Richard Tomlinson (ex-MI6), now believed to be in Germany.

We have seen the arrest by Special Branch of Kingston University student Julie Ann Davies for merely supporting David Shayler; a baffling attempt to obtain the full version of a letter written by Shayler to The Guardian and a request to hand over over any documents and e-mails relating to the Observer's contacts with the former MI5 officer. Observer journalist, Marin Bright, has appeared in court for allegedly contravening Section 5 of the Official Secrets Act (OSA) by receiving and then making damaging disclosures of secret information.

Free Press has covered the case of Tony Geraghty. MoD bullies attempted to intimidate the publishers, HarperCollins, from publishing a paperback version of his book, *The Irish War*, which Mr Geraghty described in a letter to The Times as 'an act of military censorship unprecedented in peacetime.' While the charges against Geraghty were fortunately dropped, one of his sources, Army officer Nigel Wyld, has been charged under Section 2 of the OSA for allegedly passing documents to him.

The targets for intimidation range far and wide. My publishers, Fourth Estate, were the subject of a visit by Special Branch officers during which the computer of one of its editors, Clive Priddle, was taken away. He had been in contact with Tomlinson and the plods were keen to discover the nature of their e-mail correspondence.

My publishers have refused to co-operate with the D-notice system whose mere existence is enough of a threat to make many journalists, editors, proprietors and publishers either back away from covering the activities of the security services or pre-censor their coverage.

The idea that journalists and authors should actively support the D-notice system by passing their work to the MoD is an affront to the much trumpeted idea of 'freedom of the press' and any notion of journalist ethics. Few authors insist on their publishers refusing to co-operate with this out-dated system. Unfortunately, it has been known for publishers to disregard their author's wishes and to covertly pass on their

'We are in a world that is exploding with information ... this though is only the beginning. Up until now MI6 (and MI5) has played a successful rearguard action in protecting itself, but it cannot do so forever. The era of open-source intelligence is upon us.'

manuscripts for consideration in the interests of a quiet life.

Even liberal newspapers have colluded in buttressing the system of pre-censorship. Not only do newspaper editors continue to back the D-notice system but journalists allow themselves to be intimidated by it. The system works best by fears of legal constraint and not through direct censorship.

For instance, what purpose is being served by not publishing the names of the two MI6 officers, David Watson and Richard Bartlett, who are alleged to have played a role or had knowledge of an assassination plot against Libya's Colonel Gaddafi? They were published recently in the Portuguese magazine, *Tal & Qual*, and are now available

on numerous websites.

One of the consequences of the Peter Wright/Spycatcher case and the subsequent appeals to the European court was that if allegations concerning the security and intelligence services appeared in newspapers, magazines and books outside of Britain, then they are deemed to be in the public domain. In such a situation there is nothing to stop the British press from republishing the material. There is currently a technical legal argument about the status of the Internet but it would be ridiculous if the Internet was not to be regarded as being part of the public domain.

In my new book I argue 'we are in a world that is exploding with information ... this though is only the beginning. Up until now MI6 (and MI5) has played a successful rearguard action in protecting itself, but it cannot do so forever. The era of open-source intelligence is upon us.' A few years ago, the Foreign Office's own Security Department, which has an in-house MI5 officer, discovered to its dismay that there are up to a dozen open sources identifying intelligence officers.

There is clearly a sustained and systematic campaign of intimidation designed to stop journalists from pursuing the Shayler/Tomlinson story any further. Shayler obviously knows MI5's true order-of-battle, plus a great deal about the Service's anti-terrorism work, including sources and agents, and the inside-out of how it operates. The Service is obviously deeply worried and rightly concerned, but what a way to go about shutting some one up. It has learned little from the past and seems determined to make the same mistakes as it did in the Spycatcher case.

Geraghty concluded his letter to The Times: 'I believe there should be an impartial inquiry into the way the MoD intimidates authors, publishers and their sources... The current confusion, engendering uncertainty even in the minds of publishers' lawyers, amounts to a pervasive, capricious, undefined censorship by intimidation. It is the opposite of open government.' The true colours of New Labour are on open display. Stephen Dorril's *MI6: Fifty Years of Special Operations* has just been published by Fourth Estate (£25.00)

Tom O'Malley on government plans for the future of broadcasting

'THE Government's aim is to promote the global competitiveness of our media and communications industries as well as protect the interest of the consumer. The White Paper will be broad in scope, covering areas such as future regulation of broadcast content, media ownership rules, and the role of public service broadcasting'.

This was how Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, Chris Smith, announced with Stephen Byers of the DTI, plans for a White Paper on telecommunications on 3 February. The plan is to 'reform' telecoms and broadcasting regulation to take account of the convergence of communications. For reform, read 'hand more influence over to large corporations'.

There is no doubt that the framework governing mass communications needs reform. Under the system developed by the Tories (1979-97) and enthusiastically embraced by Blair's neo-liberal government, broadcasting in the UK has become subjected to intensified commercial forces.

Concentration of ownership, the lifting of regulations on content and the vast increase in the numbers of commercial operators in TV, radio, satellite and cable have helped push standards down. The proliferation of game shows, soaps, docu-dramas and varieties of infotainment have now been widely noticed. Even the politicians have become uneasy about the effect this has had on ITV, which has now virtually removed news and current affairs from the 7-11pm schedule. The new internet services are being seen by government as primarily commercial enterprises and since it was elected this government has steadfastly refused to acquiesce in calls for a more open, public form of media policy development.

Labour has no intention of changing this situation. In the announcement Byers said the purpose of the White Paper would be to make the communications industries more 'flexible' and to 'foster competitive markets'. Smith sees listeners and viewers, not as citizens with democratic rights over mass communications, but as consumers whose interests need protecting in the new market place of ideas.

In the shaping of legislation the government is likely to listen to the big companies. They have shown precious little evidence of doing otherwise to date. When the government published a summary of responses to its Green Paper on telecoms regulation in June 1999, it read like a song of praise to

More comfort for the corporations

the market, with no substantial changes to the position the government set out in the first place in 1998 – in spite of receiving evidence from the CPBF and other organisations which pushed for a different policy.

Smith and Byers define consultation as setting up a 'Joint Communications Reform Team ... comprising officials from DTI and DCMS'. In a staggering gesture towards consultation they say that the government 'welcomes any comments and contribu-

The cultural consequences of further deregulation will be severe, with the content of our mass communications being driven ever more by commercial goals and values, rather than public service ones

tions'. Yes, they do, but about what, in what time scale, and to what effect? Nothing is said. By conducting such major exercises behind closed doors the government has in effect minimised the degree of public scrutiny and debate on these important issues. New Labour behaves much worse than Old Labour, which at least had the

News 24 'solution not problem'

THE new BBC licence fee settlement could be a threat to the Corporation's integrated news service, says the NUJ. Deputy General Secretary John Fray said the £3 a household increase – half what the Corporation needed – could force it to cut back on the plan to integrate its news services around the digital News 24 Channel, with other channels opting in for bulletins.

'News 24 is becoming a public whipping boy,' said John Fray. 'The pundits and the papers are all saying it's a waste of money because it currently has only a small audience, but in fact News 24 is not the problem – it's the solution.'

decency to promote public debate in these areas by establishing major public Royal commissions. So much for open government.

Unless there is a serious and sustained campaign the White Paper will inevitably lead to more media deregulation in the form of a Bill due, probably, after the next election in 2001. The cultural consequences of further deregulation will be severe, with the content of our mass communications

being driven ever more by commercial goals and values, rather than public service ones.

The CPBF is working to try and change this. We plan to intervene in the White Paper debate. One way will be to get local organisations in the Labour, trade union and community movement to put pressure on their MPs to get Chris Smith to consult more widely, and to justify the government's deeply damaging media policy. We also want

people to push forward motions for better policies, ones which enhance diversity of ownership and content, accountability and public service values. We need to support of all our members and affiliates on this one, so contact the CPBF national office if you think you can help. There is an awful lot at stake.

'Now the BBC is going to have to find big savings. There is a review of News 24 going on and it could face cuts instead of expansion – and at a time when ITN is about to launch its own 24-hour news channel.'

The government has left it to the BBC to find the savings, so there is still the threat to sell off the Resources Directorate or the Worldwide Publishing arm. 'None of these will improve the Corporation's service,' said John Fray.

'It really is a missed opportunity. The BBC must go digital to keep public service broadcasting in the lead.'

Bare-knuckle tactics hit Serbian media

SERBIA'S Deputy Prime Minister, Vojislav Seselj, has denounced independent Serbian journalists, and warned them 'the gloves were off' against the independent media.

Since his February 10 outburst Serbian opposition leaders have warned that attacks on the remaining independent media, including the television station B92 are 'reaching dramatic proportions' and 'amount to state police and judicial terror'.

In an ominous move, Aidan White, General secretary of the International Federation of Journalists, was refused a visa to go to Belgrade on March 11. At the beginning of March the mass circulation daily, Vecernje Novosti, which had become critical of the regime, was taken over by the government.

Armed men broke into Studio B's premises near Belgrade early in the morning on March 6, beat up two staff members and damaged equipment. The station is partly controlled by opposition parties and is consistently critical of the Milosevic regime.

Later in the day the station's editor-in-chief was fined £28,000 for broadcasting a

programme mentioning the involvement of a high-ranking police officer in a mysterious car crash last October, killing four officials of the Serbian Resistance Movement.

Finally in the evening the Yugoslav Telecommunications minister informed Studio B that it owed £800,000 for use of radio and TV frequencies, and would be shut down if it did not pay within a week.

Subsequently the City Council in Belgrade paid the money to keep the station on air, but it is clear that as Serbia moves towards elections this year Milosevic is seeking to crack down on critical voices in the media.

LOG ON

For information on Serbia's Media War www.mediachannel.org has a good survey and useful links.

One interesting item is What Makes a Journalist? When the Committee to Protect Journalists issued its list of journalists killed in 1999 it did not include the 16 victims of NATO's bombing of Radio-Television Serbia.

According to commentator, Edward S.

Herman, CPJ excluded these journalists because RTS was a state-run station, broadcasting propaganda. He asks who is the judge of news and singled out several prominent Western reporters with a strong pro-NATO stance? Would they have been included, if they had died reporting the conflict? he asks.

We should also give an honourable mention here to Robert Fisk, who won the prestigious What The Papers Say Award for foreign correspondent of the year. The judges cited his independent, critical reporting from Belgrade for The Independent.

The panel said, 'It was his investigation into the bombing of the civilian convoy in which 74 Albanian refugees died, and the precise nature of the physical evidence gathered by this correspondent which most impressed the judges.'

'He had gone to the trouble to get the evidence himself. He'd taken down all the code numbers and details from the bombs, providing incontrovertible evidence that Nato planes had dropped them. Evidence which no amount of spin could gainsay'

Tortured Russian journalist faces trial

SIMON PIRANI

RUSSIAN radio reporter Andrei Babitsky, whose honest coverage of the wars in Chechnya incurred official wrath, has been detained and tortured in a notorious prison camp and now faces a criminal trial.

Andrei Babitsky, a Caucasus specialist for the US-financed Radio Liberty, went missing in mid-January, and said after his release he had been beaten by 'sadists' in the Chernokozovo prison camp, which human rights campaigners say is a centre for the torture, rape and execution of civilians.

After an international outcry he was released on February 29 – but charged with 'participation in armed formations not permitted under federal law' – effectively, of collaborating with the Chechen rebels. Justice minister Yuri Chaika has publicly denounced him as a 'criminal'.

A week after he vanished, Russian forces admitted they had arrested him and would charge him with 'aiding armed groups'. But in early February he appeared on a televised videotape, apparently being handed to masked men in exchange for Russian soldiers held hostage by the Chechens.

There were doubts about the tape's authenticity and fears for Andrei Babitsky's life. On February 26 he turned up in



Steve Bell's 1991 cartoon from the Journalist

Dagestan, which borders Chechnya, and was re-arrested for passport irregularities. He said he had agreed with his Russian captors to be exchanged with a Chechen field commander he knew, but had been handed to another Chechen group who treated him badly.

A statement by 114 newspaper editors, TV commentators and leading Russian journalists said: 'This is the first time since perestroika started that the authorities permitted themselves to commit such an open and cynical outrage against a media representative.'

Russian journalists say the case is part of an attack on media freedom linked to the

Chechnya war. Reporting has been tightly controlled and those who refused to toe the line are harassed and publicly vilified.

NTV, the only national TV channel to offer criticism of the war, had its journalists thrown out of the military pool after it reported heavy Russian military losses. Journalists expect heavy-handed treatment to intensify after the victory in the presidential election on March 26 of Vladimir Putin, a secret police agent for much of his working life. The daily Izvestiya has reported that since Vladimir Putin became Prime Minister intelligence agencies have returned to KGB-style surveillance of journalists.

Football 1, Murdoch 0 – but it's only the first round

Not For Sale: Manchester United, Murdoch and the Defeat of BSkyB

Adam Brown & Andy Walsh

Mainstream

£9.99p

BACK in the autumn of 1998 BSkyB sent shock waves around the football world with an audacious £635 million bid for Manchester United Football Club. Audacious because it would have given Murdoch a huge advantage when it came to agreeing the next television deal. Effectively it meant that Sky would be sitting on both sides of the negotiating table.

Yet not everyone opposed the bid. There were those who saw the massive cash injection as a unique opportunity to go out and buy the best players in the world. Others instantly recognised it for what it was – the invasive tentacles of the Murdoch empire plunging into the heart of English football. And so a massive campaign was launched to stop Murdoch.

The authors of this book, Adam Brown and Andy Walsh, were among a group who initiated a spirited campaign to stop Sky.

This book is the story of that campaign, the tactics, the meetings, the lobbying, the press, and their eventual submission to the Monopolies and Mergers Commission. And then, as we all know, the Government for once had the nerve to disagree with Murdoch and the deal was thrown out. Victory to the fans. But significantly, Sky still retains its initial 10 per cent stake.

Sadly the story does not end there. If anything it's become even worse. Under current rules, no company or individual is allowed to own more than 10 per cent in more than one club. But Sky have circumvented that rule by simply taking a stake of just under 10 per cent in several clubs. This gives them a seat on the board and an influence. Last month Sky took a 9.9 per cent interest in Chelsea, to add to stakes they had already taken in Manchester United, Leeds United and Sunderland. Next season it could be even more worrying: if Manchester City – where Sky also have a 10 per cent interest – are promoted, they will be involved in five clubs, that's a quarter of the league.

And nor does it stop there. Others are just

as involved. NTL has bought into Newcastle United and Aston Villa and are feverishly looking around for other victims. One will probably be Middlesbrough where they already run the club's cable channel, and the other could be Arsenal. Meanwhile Granada has a taken a similar percentage in Liverpool.

It's not difficult to see why all these media companies are so desperately interested in football. At stake is a £1 billion plus television deal to be negotiated within the year. That deal will be especially crucial to Murdoch. Without it, Sky might just as well pull the plug.

But all these deals beg an important question: just how many more clubs will Murdoch and the other media moguls be allowed to buy into before someone takes action? This book, of course, does not answer that question but what it does provide is a recipe for campaigning against Murdoch and proves that if enough people get together they can move mountains, even Murdochs. One battle may have been won, but the war is far from over.

Stephen Kelly

Own goal for media academics

Social Policy, the Media and Misrepresentation

Edited by Bob Franklin

Routledge

£14.99

THERE'S a worrying – almost knee jerk – reaction in some academic circles which links 'media' with 'misrepresentation' before you've even had time to check out the latest Sunnation or surf the cable channels.

Not that this book is guilty of such a crude oversimplification, despite its title. Not at all. On the contrary, it is a serious, considered and thorough exploration of a complex set of relations between social policy – seen as firmly embedded in political realities – and the widely differing worlds of newspapers and television. Analyses are presented by an array of authors with substantial track records.

The book comes at a time of trauma for many campaigners for welfare reform. A deep sense of disappointment in the Labour government, mixed with a sinking recogni-

tion of the pragmatics of the contemporary political scene, permeates the chapters. Bill Jordan provocatively locates the Labour take over of the Conservative's moral agenda in the climate of opinion created by the Bulger case, arguing that it opened the way for Tony Blair's 'backward looking, nostalgic, authoritarian' appeal. But, as Jenny Kitzinger points out, it is 'unhelpful' simply to blame the press for 'media hype'.

The lack of unity in 'the media' themselves, and the pressures and negotiations which eventually produce the output received by the public also need to be explored. In the competition to dominate public ideas many sources compete for media space; the efforts of the Labour government to invade the media agenda at a multitude of different points is documented by Bob Franklin; on the other hand Kevin Williams shows that the Terrence Higgins Trust played an important role in the layered and often contradictory presentation

of issues around AIDS.

Then there are conflicts amongst journalists themselves. David Brindle, as a distinguished practitioner, describes the confusion and pragmatics of day to day reporting, in which the skills of the specialist may not win through. 'Dumbing down' and 'tabloidisation' are on the agenda – but, appropriately, are not allowed to stand as explanations in their own right.

'Misrepresentation' remains a misleading title. Even 'representation' is not accurate, since the book makes it clear that the media hardly ever merely represent. They also engage, involve, join in the debate, make spaces for the debate, titillate and entertain.

Any study of newspapers or television which concentrates just on their representational activities is bound to miss the point.

Ironically, part of that point is that titles need to be catchy and provocative. This one falls neatly into its own trap.

Patricia Holland

AGM AND CONFERENCE GET SIGNED UP!

WE'RE holding this year's AGM and Conference on Saturday May 13 at Friends Meeting House, Euston Road, London NW1 (opposite Euston Station). We urge all our members to make an effort to attend because it comes at a vital time, as we make our plans to intervene in the emerging debate on broadcasting policy.

We particularly want to invite people to get nominated to our National Council. It will play a key part in pushing forward our work over the next year.

MORNING SESSION

AGM (for members only)
Registration 10.30am Starts 11.00am

CONFERENCE

1.30-4.30pm

MEDIA MERGERS - SHOULD WE BE BOTHERED?

Mega-mergers like the Time Warner/AOL deal in January 2000 are presented in the business press in glowing terms, but what are their real consequences for people who work in media conglomerates? And if mergers do damage the range and diversity of the media can we do anything to stop them?

Speakers include Bettina Peters (International Federation of Journalists) on the impact on the work of journalists and Professor Peter Golding (Loughborough University) on the impact on information and democracy

Book your place for the event: Fee £8.00
Concessions £4.00



STEFANO CAGNONI

'Information belongs to people, not government'

THE National Union of Journalists set up a meeting in Parliament for MPs and peers last month to hear from the Irish Commissioner, Kevin Murphy (above), how the The Freedom of Information Act should work. The FoI Act in Ireland, introduced two years ago after a big campaign, is working well – in a political and legislative environment very similar to Britain's.

Murphy said that in Ireland, "an open culture with a free flow of information between government and citizens was seen as essential if confidence is to be maintained in the institutions of the state" and the growing apathy and cynicism of citizens

towards them was to be addressed.

Tory MP Richard Shepherd, a diehard Freedom of Information supporter, told the meeting that the Bill was "truly wretched. Everyone condemns it."

And unlikely Labour rebel Dr Tony Wright MP pointed out that the party had been committed to Freedom of Information since 1974, but the people who produced the Bill don't seem to believe in it.

"Information doesn't belong to government, it belongs to the people. It is the government that should justify withholding it, not the people who should justify their claims to receive it."

Free Press is edited by Granville Williams for the National Council

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