

DYKE AND THE BBC

TONY LENNON

ANY new boss who comes into a public institution shouting, "Let me through, I'm an anti-bureaucrat," can expect a warm welcome from staff at the sharp end.

At the BBC, new Director-General Greg Dyke has already won the support of programme-makers in his mission to reduce the Corporation's overheads, allowing more money to be spent on production.

Promising to reduce the BBC's non-programme expenditure from 24% to 15%, job cuts have been top of the agenda, many of them in departments set up by his predecessor John Birt to micro-manage the accounts and run the internal market.

Although, in Dyke's words, "it's not their fault", few tears have yet been shed for the senior managers and accountants whose jobs have gone in the first wave. However, even the BBC inherited from Birt will soon run out of top executives to "outplace", and the long-term target of 1,200 job cuts in three years is already affecting programme-related staff, notably technicians.

Financing and scheduling TV channels like BBC1 and BBC2 is a long-term operation, and the impact of Dyke's increase in programme budgets will take years, rather than months, to affect the schedules.

Producers of mainstream TV and radio will be watching closely to see how much of the new money comes their way, as opposed to funding new media and online projects that form an important part of Dyke's public service broadcasting vision.

Interestingly, the first known beneficiaries of extra programme budgets are to be local radio stations and producers in the Scots, Welsh, and Northern Irish national centres.

Derided though he was, John Birt's legacy contains at least two bequests that could help Dyke to ensure that the BBC is still around in ten years. The renewal of the

BBC's Charter in 1996, founded on universal provision, and a licence fee instead of advertising, was undoubtedly a political success, and provides a foundation for the migration of BBC values into the wired world – Birt's second gift to his successor.

If the BBC had not invested time and money over the last five years to develop Europe's best used content website, and new multi-media programming, it would be economically and politically impossible to start from scratch now.

None of this was popular during Birt's autumn years, as management focused on blue skies future-gazing, while core TV audiences fell. Nor does it come cheap, which is where Dyke's real financial problems begin.

Despite the unprecedented formula for licence fee increases announced this year – 1.5% over RPI for seven years – the BBC faces a gaping hole in its finances from next year onwards, even after Dyke's crusade against overheads is complete.

The government's generous licence formula actually fell far short of the funding that Birt had called for to finance an expansion of channels, a growth of new media output, and outreach community projects in adult education and citizenship.

To fulfil this vision, which Dyke believes is essential to convince government and licence payers that the BBC is worth having, more than £1bn of new funding will have to be found by 2007.

Much of this is to be raised by increasing the BBC's commercial income. The existing cash-earning subsidiaries BBC Worldwide and BBC Resources have been given tough targets for income from external customers, and a new company, BBC Technology, is due to be established, selling the BBC's high-tech broadcasting and IT expertise to

■ continued back page

CPBF PUBLIC MEETING

A RARE OPPORTUNITY

Hear one of America's most distinguished writers on the media

ROBERT McCHESNEY
RICH MEDIA, POOR DEMOCRACY

Friends Meeting House, Euston Road,
(opposite Euston Station)

Tuesday 14 November,
7.30pm

Admission £2.00

'One of the nation's most important analysts of the media'

Howard Zinn

'A public intellectual of the first order'

Sut Jhally

Robert McChesney's most recent book is *Rich Media, Poor Democracy*

It's the Media, Stupid by John Nichols and Robert McChesney is an Open Media pamphlet just published by Seven Stories Press

FRINGE MEETING AT THE LABOUR PARTY CONFERENCE

David Shayler and Friends

Uncensored

Sussex Arts Club 7 Ship Street, Brighton
(alongside the Old Ship Public House)

Thursday 28 September 12.45 pm

Speakers:

David Shayler (facing prosecution under the Official Secrets Act)

Stephen Dorril (author *M16: Fifty Years of Special Operation*)

Tony Geraghty (author *The Irish War* – charged under the Official Secrets Act)

Annie Machon (Organiser of the Campaign 'Public Friend Number One')

Followed by **uncensored discussion**

Organised by the Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom and the NUJ

Power of the lobby

Jonathan Hardy analyses responses to consultation on the white paper

155 submissions were made on the Communications White Paper, more than double the total for the earlier green paper, *Regulating Communications* (1998).

This time more voluntary organisations, unions and even some independent media academics have responded. A quarter of the submissions are from the commercial media industry, directly or via industry bodies, but that figure belies their influence, which is undoubtedly the strongest (see FP115).

The partial exposure via the internet of an intense phase of industry lobbying and special pleading is fascinating to read, although much of the underlying arguments will be depressingly familiar to FP readers over the last decade or more.

We've made our own position clear in the CPBF submission (now available, with the others mentioned below, at www.communicationswhitepaper.gov.uk).

On media ownership, commercial companies in general, but especially those defending dominant positions such as News International, favour reliance on general competition regulation and the dismantling of media specific regulation of content and cross-media ownership (for an interesting, if predictable, alternative, see *United Broadcasting and Entertainment*).

Newspaper groups want the removal of cross-ownership restrictions and a veto on any further regulation of editorial or advertising (see, for instance, *Trinity Mirror, Newspaper Society*).

Even the ITC, strongly attacked elsewhere and clearly on the defensive, says rules should not prevent a single ITV or necessarily impede further integration of cross-media interests, notably between newspapers and broadcasting.

Industry interests are not surprisingly diverse, but support for a single communications regulator, for some OFCOM, is strong, and more worryingly, is shared by consumer bodies (National Consumer Council).

The general regulatory model emerging combines self-regulation with some statutory 'backstop' controls for media content, together with general competition regulation, and some transitional media-specific regulation for economic and infrastructure regulation. Traditionally, media regulation has sought to balance commer-

cial interests with 'public policy' interests, such as pluralism, diversity, quality and impartiality, albeit often in vague and highly unsatisfactory ways.

What a single regulator promises, according to several big companies, is a regulatory regime which prevents abuses of economic competition between firms in emerging markets (e.g gateway controls, network access), allows much greater concentration (on the grounds that only market dominance, defined in narrowly economic terms, triggers regulatory action) and which either ignores content regulation or assesses certain content requirements as unfair restrictions on market behaviour.

A key term, promoted both by Chris Smith and BSKyB is 'competition plus'. This,

The issue of 'consumer welfare' highlights contradictions which go to the heart of communications policy, and which the CPBF with others, must seek to bring out in the next crucial months

as the ITC puts it, means "the market is the base line, and deviations from that, including public service requirements, have to be justified in terms of costs and benefits."

All of this is promoted not just in the breathless rhetoric of technological determinism (technology as the originator of social, cultural and indeed regulatory change), but on behalf of the consumer. The issue of 'consumer welfare' highlights contradictions which go to the heart of communications policy, and which the CPBF with others, must seek to bring out in the next crucial months.

First, as Andrew Graham, of the invited panel of experts, puts it, "In the digital age when activities as diverse as shopping, banking, visiting an estate agent, consulting your doctor, choosing a school, taking your

degree, or buying a pension, may all start (and in some cases end) with the PC/TV, will consumers think it wise that the initial menus (and thus the defaults) could all be under the control of a single commercial firm?"

Second, the consumer interest is powerfully undermined by the very commercial pressures which a market system generates, nowhere more clearly than in the changing, dynamic relationship of media and advertising.

The Advertising Association rightly criticises the Government for its lack of consideration of advertising within communications policy to date. For the AA and other sections of the advertising lobby, the goal is to ensure that advertising self-regulation via the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA), is maintained for non-broadcasting advertising and extended to cover broadcasting.

But, as the ITC highlights there are powerful commercial motives for blurring the distinction of editorial and advertising in both directions: commercial messages in programmes and by making advertisements look like editorial.

It is the implications of the advertising-funded basis of most media that the Government ignores at our peril.

Publishers (IPA, News International etc.) seek liberalisation of the rules governing masthead programmes (ones based on and sponsored by print magazines) and programme sponsorship, such as the 'pioneering' *The Pepsi Chart*.

Those who argue that the internet today represents the unavoidable regulatory model for the future (see the experts paper by Tambini and Forgan) occasionally acknowledge that this means dismantling entirely the rules on distinguishing editorial from advertising that still apply to UK broadcasting.

This then leaves companies arguing a pro-consumer line while also stating that the existing measures of such consumer protection should be removed, as impediments to innovation and competitiveness.

Public service broadcasting in many industry submissions is displaced to the periphery of a market dominated system, and ignores other vital considerations of citizenship and the media's role in a democracy.

In turn, this pro-market vision is strongly opposed elsewhere (*Campaign for Quality Television*) and we must work with all such allies to try to shape policies which may endure until 2015.

Letter from secretary of the D notice committee

In FP 115 we published Stephen Dorril's article where he named the MI6 officers who are alleged to have played a role, or had knowledge of an assassination plot, against Libya's Colonel Gaddafi. We received this letter from Rear Admiral Nick Wilkinson, Secretary of the Defence, Press and Broadcasting Advisory Committee – the 'D' Notice Committee.

THERE is much in Stephen Dorril's article in your April edition with which I do not quibble. But there are also comments where further information might be helpful or where his criticisms of journalists and fellow-writers need a response.

Firstly, the MOD gave way on the publication of the paperback version of Tony Geraghty's book as long ago as last November, and I subsequently gave answers in *The Times* in March to various other of the author's concerns, answers which are not reflected in Stephen Dorril's article.

Secondly, nobody has to co-operate with the D-Notice system (see www.dnotice.org.uk), and those who do, do not have to accept the advice given. Some nevertheless find it useful in checking whether certain details are indeed damaging to national security (ie to current and future operations, and to the operators). And it is certainly preferable (and cheaper and quicker) to discuss such details rather than to face the occasional alternative, for example blanket injunctions by Government departments and/or police investigations and possible prosecutions. When I am consulted, I find I have to advise very little if any change, and I am just as likely to tell an official that he is being unjustifiably secretive.

I can find no trace of any journalist or writer complaining that it is the existence of the independent and media-heavy D-Notice Committee which has discouraged them from writing about national security matters, although of course there are

discouragements elsewhere, eg the Official Secrets Act. Nor can I share Stephen Dorril's apparent low opinion of the many journalists and authors who do use the system as being 'intimidated'.

Perhaps it was to show that he cannot be 'intimidated' that Stephen Dorril chose to re-broadcast the names of the two serving SIS officers.

I do not know, and neither does anyone else outside SIS for certain, whether the two are in some way personally culpable. It is certain that nothing is yet proven, and yet repeating their names further limits their personal employability, for both cover and safety reasons. What therefore is gained by further publicising their names at present? And the fact that such details are sometimes published in usually rather obscure and specialist media/internet outlets abroad is only a partial, not a conclusive, consideration in judging whether something is widely known, even to all hostile intelligence organisations.

There is indeed, thankfully, much that is in the public domain, and, in my personal opinion there could be more. The D-Notice system, if used properly by both media and officials, heads off litigation and imposed censorship, allows intelligent discussion, and leaves the final decision whether to publish with the media. There are a few, like Stephen Dorril, who choose not to use the system, and who believe they are well able to judge for themselves what is or is not damaging to national security. In the case of his recent book, he was right; had he sought my advice before publication, I would have said that there was nothing significant in it that was not already in the public domain.

Stephen Dorril replies:

I would make three points.

Although cooperation with the D-Notice system may be voluntary for publishers and editors, that is not the case for journalists and writers. I know of many journalists who, against their wishes, have had to cut their articles because of instructions from editors, following advice from the Committee.

When a system has been in operation for nearly a century it becomes one of those 'myriad of half-committees' described by John Cornwell (John le Carré) which go to make up the secret state.

While it is true that some writers do refuse to cooperate with the D-Notice system it is known that some books have been given to the committee for consideration without the knowledge of the authors.

As for the naming of the two MI6 officers. Some journalists did want to publish their names but were stopped by the editors. What can be more public and open to 'hostile' intelligence agencies than the Internet? This is only the beginning and the security services will have to get used to operating with this new openness.

I am glad that Nick Wilkinson would have passed my book because on the 17 March my publishers received a letter from the Treasury solicitor, acting on behalf of his client MI6, asking for an explanation of why I had broken an injunction with regard to material relating to former MI6 officer, Richard Tomlinson. It is encouraging to see that Nick Wilkinson has a more liberal attitude to these matters.

■ Stephen Dorril's book, *MI6: 50 Years of Special Operations*, is published by Fourth Estate.

UN criticises government on news

JIM ADDINGTON

AN INVESTIGATOR from the United Nations Human Rights Commission, who visited Britain in November last year, has strongly criticised the government's record on free publication of news. So far there is no record of a reply from the government.

The UN survey followed the war over Kosovo. Much of the report is relevant to the censorship (voluntary or otherwise) of real news from Yugoslavia then. It also acknowledges recent constitutional developments in Ireland and welcomes the incorpo-

ration of the European Convention of Human Rights into British law, but the investigator believes that the government's attitude to freedom of expression falls short of what is expected from a democracy.

The Special Rapporteur of the UN investigation, Abid Hussain, saw a 'free and vibrant press' in Britain, but his reservations were clear. The Official Secrets Act prevents retired and serving civil servants and military personnel from revealing information even if it is in the public interest to do so. It is not even possible to use the fact that

the information has already been published as a defence against prosecution.

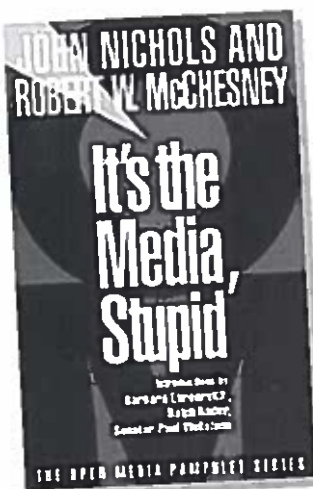
The UN Rapporteur describes the unofficial system of 'D' notices as supplementing the Official Secrets Act in restraining freedom of expression. As Mr Hussein writes, it is not accountable to Parliament or the public. Moreover, although its edicts are advisory it represents the powerful government machine to which journalists look for day-to-day information. Ignoring these notices may damage their career.

JAdding37@aol.com

MEDIA DEMOCRACY NOW!

Granville Williams

An impressive variety of media activism is flourishing in the US. Partly, this is in response to the issues raised by the forthcoming elections. For example Seven Stories Press has just published *It's the Media, Stupid* by John Nichols and Robert W. McChesney in the excellent Open Media series, as a



catalyst for debate during the election season. The book details how a handful of transnational conglomerates use their immense political and economic power to carpet bomb the population with commercial messages. The authors analyse how journalism, electoral politics, entertainment, art and culture have suffered as a result. The early hopes of the internet as a media system which would provide a platform for new voices, and its transformation into another arm of the corporate communication system, is also discussed. Other initiatives in the US also raise basic questions about the purpose and direction of US media policy, and the role of the big media corporations in promoting their own interests.

IT WOULD be difficult to imagine a protest demonstration being organised in the UK around a meeting of the movers and shakers in the broadcasting industry, but that is what has been planned for the annual radio convention of the National Association of Broadcasters (NAB) in San Francisco between September 20-23.

A range of organisations, from Project Censored and Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR) to the National Lawyers Guild Committee for Democratic Communications and the Micropower Action Coalition (more on this later) are urging their members and supporters to 'Act up, party down, raise hell, shout out.'

NAB is the principal lobbying and membership organisation for the commercial broadcasting industry – publicity for the protest describes it as 'the WTO of the broadcasting industry. It spends millions of dollars every year lobbying to keep the airwaves out of the hands of the public'.

FAIR in its ACTION ALERT publicising the protest points out that the staggering pace of consolidation in the media industry has 'shifted the balance of power to a small handful of companies with interests and investments spread across the media landscape. Ironically, the changes have been most profound in radio, a medium ideally suited to local ownership and diverse content'. Since the 1996 Telecommunications Act, which NAB was intimately involved in crafting, over 4,000 radio stations have been brought up to create a handful of huge radio empires like Viacom/Infinity and Clear Channel.

Now NAB is pushing the Federal Communication Commission (FCC) for an end to the few remaining cross-ownership rules so that newspapers can also be absorbed into media empires.

CAMPAIGN FINANCE REFORM

The tentacles of NAB spread widely. Back in March 1997 President Bill Clinton addressed a conference on Free TV and Political Reform where he said, 'We are the only major democracy in the world where candidates have to raise larger and larger sums of money simply to communicate with voters through the medium that matters most. Every other major democracy offers candidates or parties free air time to speak to voters...'

In the January 1998 State of the Union

Direct Action for Media Democracy
Sept. 20-23, 2000
Protest the National Association of Broadcasters Convention in San Francisco

Act up, party down, raise hell, shout out.

The National Association of Broadcasters is the WTO of the broadcasting industry. It spends millions of dollars every year lobbying to keep the airwaves out of the hands of the public. We can thank the NAB and the mediagiants that it represents for:

- Putting out the trash called commercial radio and TV.
- Stereotyping youth, people of color, and working class people.
- Censoring and misrepresenting the issues that we care about—from homelessness and immigrant rights to the environment and labor.
- Pushing for legislation like the Telecommunication Act of 1996, which legalized media monopolies, creating The Gap and Starbucks of the airwaves.
- Engineering the giveaway of billions of public dollars by handing over the digital TV spectrum to the corporate media.
- Fighting tooth-and-nail against grassroots media efforts like low-power radio that would bring hundreds of new voices and perspectives to the airwaves.

Bring your microradio transmitters, your dancing shoes, and your militant nonviolent attitude.

Join Media Alliance, Project Censored, Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting, Ella Baker Center for Human Rights, Micropower Action Coalition, Global Exchange, Prometheus Radio Project, Direct Action Network and other organizations in protest!

For more information visit www.mediademocracynow.org

Media Alliance (415) 546-6324; Fax 546-6218
info@medialliance.org www.medialliance.org
814 Mission Street, Suite 205, San Francisco, CA 94103

address Clinton decried the campaign funding 'arms race' and proposed a new policy: 'I will formally request that the FCC act to provide free or reduced-cost television time for candidates. The airwaves are a public trust, and broadcasters also have to help us in this effort to strengthen our democracy.' Within twenty-four hours FCC chairman William Kennard announced that the FCC would develop new rules governing political ads.

The assault on this policy initiative was swift and brutal. Free air time for political candidates would cost broadcasters millions of dollars in lost advertising revenue, and they were not going to allow the proposal to survive. The threat of a shrunken budget for

'Media reformers have to organise and educate. That is the only way for the media reform agenda to be taken seriously.'

the FCC and a congressional backlash were enough to kill the proposal stone dead.

NAB has played a key role in mobilising against such common-sense finance reform measures, and has consistently opposed free airtime for candidates. In the September/October Columbia Journalism Review (www.cjr.org) Charles Lewis has a powerful piece, MEDIA MONEY: How Corporate Spending Blocked Political Ad Reform and Other Stories of Influence, where he points out, 'No media organisation spends more money lobbying or has more people covering Washington than the NAB, which has spent \$19.42 million to persuade government officials since 1996'.

MICRORADIO AND DEMOCRACY

However NAB doesn't always get its own way. One of the most energetic and effective campaigns by low power radio activists led to a partial victory in January 2000 when the FCC announced its plans to begin licensing low power stations across the country.

The campaign to develop a distinct, affordable, low powered, community radio provision separate from commercial broadcasting has been active for over ten years. An Open Media pamphlet by Greg Ruggiero, Microradio and Democracy: (Low) Power to the People (Seven Stories Press, £3.99) gives a lively account of the issues and the way the movement has built support. This has included some members of the FCC, whose chair, William Kennard is a Clinton appointee. They believe a vibrant low power radio movement could bring hundreds of new voices and perspectives to the air.

NAB however is tenacious. In March this year it mounted an offensive, saying the FCC proposals will create a 'sea of interference' from low power FM radio transmitters. NAB filed a suit in federal court and distributed a CD on Capitol Hill with a computer-simulated example of interference.

The microradio movement still faces an uphill battle, and the people who turn up for the San Francisco protest are urged to bring their microradio transmitters, dancing shoes and a militant non-violent attitude.

PSB CAMPAIGN

The decline of public service broadcasting has been well documented by media reformers in the US, but there's a lively new organisation, Citizens for Independent Public Broadcasting,

which wants to reclaim public broadcasting for the public interest.

It has just launched a Declaration of Public Broadcasting Independence which proclaims:

"We hold these truths, as stated by the Carnegie Commission reports on public broadcasting, to be self-evident:

- that 'public broadcasting create programs primarily to serve the needs of audiences, not to sell products or to meet demands of the marketplace,'
- that 'public broadcasting has a responsibility to use these most powerful communications media as tools to enhance citizenship and public service,'
- that the mission of public broadcasting is to serve as a 'forum for controversy and debate' and 'a voice for groups in the community that may otherwise be unheard' so that we could 'see America whole, in all its diversity.'

We therefore commit ourselves to this campaign to reform public broadcasting as an independent public trust in service to all people of this nation"

Details of its activity are on: www.cipb-online.org

MEDIA CHANNEL

Congratulations to the Media Channel (www.mediachannel.org) which is going from strength to strength. It's worth regular visits. Danny Schechter, author of *The More You Watch, The Less You Know* (Seven Stories Press) and a key figure in launching the Media Channel, has an excellent item on the site, 'Making Media An Issue', which is recommended. The piece gives a good overview of the issues media reformers need to tackle in the USA, but the web site carries a wealth of international media news too.

It's worth quoting from Danny Schechter's piece. 'We who want to change the media have to articulate what we are for, as well as what we oppose. We need to communicate our values and make our case in a way that can engage, persuade and organize public opinion. That means explaining and justifying our policy proposals, not just hurling slogans in the air. (Hurling in them on the air might be OK, but so far that has proven hard to do.)

Media reformers have to organise and educate. That is the only way for the media reform agenda to be taken seriously.'

Sound advice, and just as applicable to the sort of work the CPBF needs to be doing in the UK.

AOL/TIME WARNER DEAL CHALLENGED

EUROPEAN regulators have reached a preliminary conclusion on AOL's proposed merger with Time Warner.

The merged company, worth an estimated \$132 billion (£90.2 billion), would create a dominant position that could hurt competition, according to the findings. The biggest concern was with the concentration of content the new entity would have, with a near-stranglehold on the delivery of music over the internet.

The EU statement says, 'The more content AOL acquires and the bigger its community of users, the less reasons for subscribers to abandon AOL's walled garden and the more reasons for potential internet users to join AOL.'

However this judgement will be hotly contested. As we went to press meetings with the EU's competition department by AOL and Time Warner officials were taking place.

It has to reach a final decision on the merger by October 24.

Meanwhile back in the USA, AOL/Time Warner's formidable lobbying machine is surely being deployed as the competition watchdog, the Federal Trade Commission, expresses concern about whether AOL/Time Warner will allow open access to its high speed, broadband internet services. Time Warner's cable systems cover 20% of the US population, and the FCC is seeking guarantees that the cable lines will not just give preference to AOL, but be open to competitors.

WH SMITH/TESCO DISTRIBUTION ROW

The Periodical Publishers' Association (PPA) have published a specially commissioned report on the impact of the proposed plan by Tesco and WH Smith to distribute magazines nationally, and cut out the present regional system. The long-term prediction of the report is fewer titles and loss of journalists' jobs.

The proposed deal would give WH Smith News the monopoly on magazine distribution nationally to all Tesco's 630 stores and WH Smith Retail's 673 outlets.

It would mean in effect that they controlled 50 per cent of the magazine distribution market. Also unless publishers sign up to the retailers' supply contract, their titles won't be on the supermarket shelves.

At present there are 55,000 retail outlets for magazines and newspapers. The deal could, according to the report, mean as many as 8,000 small retail outlets – mainly rural and corner shops – disappearing.

The Newspaper Society is also concerned about the deal's impact on the local and regional press. It believes that if the deal was extended to newspapers the number of

outlets closing would be between 9000 and 12,000.

The PPA has launched a £1 million campaign to improve awareness of what the new deal will mean. Ian Locks of the PPA said, 'It is appalling and disgraceful. Minority publications won't stand a chance under the proposed deal because these wholesalers won't stock them.'

FOX FINE

An important, but generally unreported, story concerning an award of damages against Rupert Murdoch's Fox television appeared recently in Private Eye. It reported that Murdoch's station was ordered to pay US\$ 425,000 damages to one of its investigative reporters who had threatened to blow the whistle on 'the broadcast of a false, distorted or slanted news report' to US broadcasting regulators.

A jury in Tampa, Florida, awarded the damages to reporter Jane Akre, after Fox sacked her for refusing to water down allegations about the use of Monsanto's controversial bovine growth hormone (BGH) in Florida cattle. Jane and her husband Steve Wilson, both respected investigative journalists, discovered that Florida dairy workers were injecting cows with BGH to boost milk output. Researchers suggested that it might be linked to cancer. Although used in the US, BGH is banned in the UK, most of Europe, New Zealand and Canada.

Monsanto happens to be a major source of advertising revenue for Fox and both reporters allege that Fox bowed to high-level pressure from Monsanto to scrap the programme, scheduled for broadcasting in February 1997. They also quoted a letter from Monsanto to the head of Fox News in New York which claimed the programme was inaccurate and went on to say, 'There is a lot at stake in what is going on in Florida, not only for Monsanto, but also for Fox News and its owner.'

The pair alleged the station offered to buy out their employment contacts in exchange for their resignation and promise not to publish details of the story. When they refused, they were asked to rewrite their script many many times. They refused to include information from Monsanto that hormone-injected milk was as safe as pure milk and were sacked.

Fox denied the allegations, saying the journalists refused to abide by the company's preferred style of presenting both sides of the argument, without the critical analysis. How come a case with such important implications for freedom of information and the right to report the activities of big business receives so little publicity in the mainstream press either in the US or in the UK? Surely just a careless omission!

(Source Private Eye issues 1009 and 1010)

NATO DECLARES WAR ON OPEN GOVERNMENT

MEPs returned from their holidays at the end of August to find that the Council of the European Union had radically changed the Decision on public access to documents which had been in place since December 1993. The Legal Affairs Committee of the European Parliament now has to decide whether to recommend that the parliament takes legal action against the Council over its change to the code on access to documents.

European journalists have accused EU military and political leaders of a 'summer-time coup' against greater transparency in government following the decision in Brussels to slip through new rules on public access to documents. On 26 July during the week MEPs started their holidays, COREPER (the permanent representatives of EU governments based in Brussels) agreed by 11 to 4 to change the code of access to meet the demands of NATO and the US to permanently exclude whole categories of documents from access. The new decision was rushed through by 'written procedure' on 14 August and came into effect on 23 August.

'This outrageous action brings in secrecy by the back door and undermines the commitment in the Amsterdam Treaty which enshrines public right of access to European Union documents,' said Aidan White, General Secretary of the European Federation of Journalists. 'It is a summer-time-coup that may compromise democratic accountability in the European Union.'

Under the new Code the public will not be allowed access to documents 'classified as top secret, secret and confidential in the fields of foreign policy, military and non-military crisis management'.

This is a NATO-backed declaration of war on open government,' said the EFJ. 'We understand why military and security people want to minimise public scrutiny, but they are riding roughshod over the democratic process and international agreements.'

Ten governments voted for the new Code at the COREPER meeting, with only one NATO country – the Netherlands – voting against, along with Finland and Sweden. Dutch journalists and those from Nordic countries are particularly incensed by the move that threatens long-established access rules in these countries.

The decision also throws into confusion the process of defining new rules of public access to information in the European Union. The Commission's proposals for a new Code are being discussed within the European Parliament under a co-decision process with the Council of Ministers. This action puts a question mark over these discussions.

■ For full details on this story visit: www.statewatch.org the website of Statewatch, the organisation which tracks civil liberties and secrecy in the European Union.

FOI bill hangs in the balance

MAURICE FRANKEL

THE next few weeks will decide what kind of Freedom of Information (FoI) Act Britain will have. The current weak bill could be transformed in the House of Lords. But there is also speculation that the bill might be dropped.

The bill contains a series of class exemptions, allowing information to be withheld even if disclosure is not shown to be harmful. A gigantic exemption applies to all information about the formulation of government policy, even the facts on which decisions are based.

Faced with a barrage of criticism, the government has offered a trivial concession: access to relevant statistics after a decision is taken. Other statistics and factual informa-

tion could still be concealed. This hopeless approach is weaker than the existing openness code, introduced by the Tories.

Another class exemption protects all information obtained by prosecuting authorities, even if disclosure could not prejudice legal proceedings. Health and safety inspection reports could then be suppressed.

A third exemption protects information which, in the authority's opinion, would 'prejudice the effective conduct of public affairs'. The wording is designed to prevent the bill's Information Commissioner challenging authorities' decisions. In these cases, information could still be disclosed on grounds of overriding public interest – a glimmer of hope. But ministers could veto

any order against a government department, though other authorities would have to comply.

The Lords are shaping up to narrow these unacceptable exemptions, though the government could reverse changes in the Commons. But Labour MPs will not relish being told to stamp on elementary improvements and may force concessions.

Will the bill even get that far? The backlog of unfinished legislation in the Lords has prompted speculation that a major bill – and FoI has been mentioned – be dropped to get the rest through.

But FoI was a manifesto commitment at each of the last six elections, and the last one personally endorsed by Tony Blair.

To drop it now, should be unthinkable.

REVIEW

The Universal Journalist

(Second edition) by David Randall
Pluto Press £12.99

DAVID Randall's second and updated edition of *The Universal Journalist* is an essential and excellent guide. It includes sections on writing for the web, computer assisted reporting, sources, and handling numbers and statistics. The author also highlights the need to acquire a range of skills to operate in a fast changing industry.

However, I found the chapter of ethics both challenging and disappointing. David asserts that 'ultimately the main factor in deciding what ethics are actually practised is competition'. He goes on to point out that journalists have a sanction as well. 'We do not have to be mere creatures of the papers we work for; we have a choice. Just as readers can stop buying, so journalists can change jobs. We can decide that there are some things we will not do and leave the paper ...' So the real prospect is 'the dole' or joining the ever-growing army of freelancers.

Surely the real issue is one of collective action through the trade union. There is some relationship between the decline of ethical standards in the press and the weakening of the media unions. So why no reference to collective action in defence of ethical standards? And what of the journalists overseas who, with union support, stand up to state and media owners' abuses of ethical standards, often at the expense of their own personal freedom and sometimes, their lives?

Notwithstanding this important reservation, I thoroughly recommend this book.

Barry White

NUJ members organise to tackle asylum bias

A MAJOR campaign to change the appalling media coverage directed at asylum seekers has been launched by the National Union of Journalists. Refugees say that present coverage has increased the number of attacks on asylum seekers and heightened racial tension in the UK.

Now the NUJ is calling for a change in coverage to spotlight the raw deal faced by asylum seekers in the UK as well as the tragic situations from which many are fleeing. Much of the work in this area is being led by the Refugees, Asylum Seekers and the Mass Media Project (RAM) which is run by a small group of NUJ members.

RAM coordinator Terry Williams says: 'The RAM project is all about training and supporting the many small and under-resourced refugee and asylum seeker groups in how to work with the media and help turn the tide of dangerous coverage.'

'Journalists have a responsibility to seek out the real stories about how and why

asylum seekers arrive in this country and not simply settle for easy and inaccurate stereotypes.

'We have a duty to expose the abuses of basic human rights faced by asylum seekers after they arrive in our country. We should report the growing levels of racial abuse, physical attacks and harassment they are experiencing as well as inadequate housing and health care.

'There are real stories out there which will counter media coverage which has so far encouraged bigotry and racism. People who have fled their homelands out of fear deserve a better deal from Britain. NUJ members can help make it clear that asylum seekers and refugees are welcome here.'

The NUJ campaign will include reinforcing the union's Code of Conduct and Guidelines on Race Reporting and promoting the help that is available to members through the NUJ Ethics Hotline on 020 7843 3702.

BBC News 'has lost its way'

IN A rather sad session at the Edinburgh International Festival, *Can News Be Sexy?*, the BBC's former Washington correspondent, Charles Wheeler, declared the corporation had 'lost its way with news' and that rival Channel 4 was better. He told the Festival audience that news anchor Huw Edwards should have resigned rather than submit to a BBC makeover. 'They were telling him how to do his hair,' said Wheeler.

The session was publicised 'with research provided by Ipsos-RSL'. And what was the research? A list of the sexiest male and female newsreaders, compiled by interviewing a few hundred people.

Dyke and the BBC

from front page

market customers. In Manchester, commercialism is to be taken even further with the creation of a new TV studio and editing company, jointly owned by the BBC and local ITV company Granada. The studios at BBC Manchester will close.

Most programme-makers, and many observers who support the BBC's move into the new media world, have welcomed the prospect of extra income from commercial projects. Staff, on the other hand, especially those involved in the commercial subsidiaries, have questioned whether the BBC needs to gamble its production facilities and communications networks on the success of limited companies, which although being wholly-owned, can still go bust.

In its first two years, BBC Resources has failed to win the large increases in commercial revenue that it originally forecast, and is now engaged in a major round of job cuts as a result.

On that track record, Dyke's plans to fill the funding gap with commercial income could well be blown off course.

Meanwhile, and in spite of job cuts being announced almost every week, Dyke has won over the vast majority of the BBC's sharp end staff with his new motto: "It's the programmes, stupid"

CPBF NEWS

FRINGE MEETING AT TUC

We organised The Truth Behind the Headlines: The Press, Refugees and Asylum Seekers in association with RAM (Refugees, Asylum-Seekers and the Mass Media) and the Scottish Refugee Council.

The speakers were Granville Williams for the CPBF, Terry Williams, Co-ordinator RAM Project and of the Scottish Refugee Council.

LABOUR PARTY FRINGE MEETING Are The Media Moguls Taking Over?

Speakers:

Peter Barry, Scottish Refugee Council

Tony Lennon, President BECTU

Tom O'Malley, CPBF National Council

Phillip Whitehead MEP

Monday, 25 September 12.45pm

Queens Hotel, 1 Kings Street, Brighton

TACKLING RACISM IN THE MEDIA

Has anything changed in the media since publication of the Macpherson Report? Institutional racism was identified in many parts of society, but little has been said about the media. The treatment of Winston Silcott reported in FP 113 and the responses to asylum seekers and refugees in both the national and regional press, all show that racial stereotyping is alive and well in many of our newsrooms. And what of employment practices, where are the Black and Asian faces, mostly behind the camera and away from the newsrooms?

The conference, called by the NUJ and

supported by the CPBF is timely and offers media workers an opportunity to join together to take stock and develop policies to counter racism in the newsrooms and other parts of the media.

Speakers include Doreen Lawrence, mother of Stephen, Gurbux Singh (Chair of the Commission for Racial Equality, Bhikhu Parekh (Commission on the future of Multi-Ethnic Britain), Simon Israel (Channel Four News) and Gary Younge (Guardian). There will be panel discussions, open forums and in the evening a buffet and entertainment.

■ **THE MEDIA AFTER LAWRENCE**, Saturday 21 October 1.00pm The Tabernacle, Powis Square, London W11 followed by buffet and social. Delegates fees and other information contact Kyran Connolly at the NUJ (020 7843 3713 or email on kyranc@nuj.org.uk) or the CPBF national office on 020 7278 4430.

CPBF MEDIA CONFERENCE

As part of our work around the communications white paper, the CPBF is planning a major conference in February 2001 to discuss its policy proposals. This event will have prominent national and international speakers, workshops, and the opportunity for a range of organisations to be involved in the planning.

This initiative is at the top of our priorities, and we want it to be a focal point for ideas and policies to influence legislation.

We have booked the Conference Centre at Britannia House for Saturday February ?? . Leaflets and other publicity will be coming out in the autumn, but we urge all CPBF members to put the date in their diaries now, come along to it, and build the widest possible support for the conference.

Free Press is edited by Granville Williams for the National Council

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