

COMMUNICATIONS
BILL
CAMPAIGN

Shadow OFCOM premature says CPBF

Plans unveiled by the government to establish a 'shadow' OFCOM in advance of its communications bill have been criticised by the CPBF as "premature, and designed to pre-empt the parliamentary debate on whether there should be this giant body to regulate broadcasting."

OFCOM, which is intended to swallow all existing regulators except the BBC Governors, is the cornerstone of New Labour's forthcoming legislation aimed at deregulating and restructuring mass communications. In an extended timetable announced in the Queen's Speech and elaborated by the Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), the Communications Bill is not now due to reach the statute books until 2003. But media union negotiators in talks with officials about the role of the new body have been told that moves are already under way to find offices and recruit staff for a 'shadow' OFCOM. The government, it appears, wants the regulator set up with all speed.

Concerned that the government is sidestepping a full debate by MPs the CPBF has organised a parliamentary question on the legal status of the shadow body. At the same time an early meeting is being sought with minister Tessa Jowell – now at the helm of DCMS – to discuss OFCOM, cross media ownership, public service broadcasting and the

need for the widest possible public consultation on all aspects of the Communications Bill.

The DCMS has confirmed that the communications bill will deal with OFCOM, elaborate on proposed conditions for cross-media ownership and will develop all the other proposals for deregulating and revamping mass communications envisaged in the communications white paper. The draft will be published sometime between the autumn this year and early 2002 followed by the formal bill in November next year. It will then proceed through the parliamentary stages with a view to obtaining royal assent in 2003.

Recent press reports suggest that the parliamentary timetable has slipped by a year because of failure by the media industry to agree on the levels of cross media ownership it would like to see introduced. The CPBF intends to make good use of the extra months to strengthen an ambitious programme of awareness-raising and lobbying activities launched at a London meeting on 27 June.

A short Bill to establish Ofcom, presented by Baroness Blackstone, received its first reading in the House of Lords on Friday 13 July. A second reading is scheduled for October.

ACTION PROGRAMME LAUNCHED

Fears that the Communications Bill will lead to a 'dumbing down' of programmes and put public service broadcasters in the wilderness gave a big impetus to a recent meeting in London of media unions and community groups organised by the CPBF and the voluntary organisations coalition Public Voice.

Coming together for the first time, some 50 broadcasters, trade unionists and representatives of voluntary organisations met in London on 27 June to jointly launch a Communications Bill Campaign under the banner 'Communications Revolution – Who benefits?'

Speakers included TV producer and presenter Roger Bolton, Steven Barnett, Professor of Communications at the University of Westminster, Tony Lennon,

CPBF National Council member and BECTU president, and Steve Buckley of the Community Media Association. They saw in the Communications Bill serious implications for all sections of the community and for people's democratic right to be informed. Pressure was already on, they stressed, for broadcasters to drop standards in the commercial scramble for ever-larger audiences. The media concentration and market place ethos opened up by the Bill would only make the situation worse.

Participants endorsed a programme of action on the communications bill. This included a series of public meetings in major cities starting with Manchester on 13 October to be followed by events in Glasgow, Nottingham, Cardiff, Sheffield, Liverpool, Leeds, Newcastle; briefings of



Independent producer Roger Bolton makes a point at the London launch of the CPBF/PublicVoice campaign

MPs; union briefings of workers in broadcasting in all the main TV companies; a fringe meeting at Labour Party Annual Conference and a new CPBF pamphlet on media issues raised by the communications bill.

The meeting warmly welcomed news from NUJ Vice-President John Barsby that an International Campaign to Protect Public Service Broadcasting had recently been set up under the auspices of the International Federation of Journalists.

THE FLEXIBLE CODE

'MORE LIKE A LETTER FROM A FAN THAN A CONSIDERED VERDICT'

In July the Press Complaints Commission announced that the Sun's payments in May to Ronnie Biggs and a number of his associates did not breach Section 16 of its Code of Practice, which states that no payment shall be made to a convicted criminal or his associates "except where the material concerned ought to be published in the public interest and payment is necessary for this to be done".

However, the PCC's three-page adjudication, aptly described by Ian Hargreaves in the Independent as "more like a letter from a fan than a considered verdict", barely addresses the all-important 'material concerned'. In its investigation of the Sun's actions, the PCC actually asked entirely the wrong questions, namely: "what was the purpose of the payments to Michael Biggs and Bruce Reynolds? Were these 'necessary' in order to secure the return of Biggs to justice? Would he have returned home otherwise?"

The Sun declared that it was 'abundantly clear' that Biggs would not have returned unless payment had been made, and, without apparently having investigated the matter any further, the PCC stated that: "it was impossible for the Commission to conclude that the result of the newspaper's payment – and the consequent return of Biggs to Britain – was against the public interest. To do so would – in effect – be to condone the continued presence of a wanted criminal abroad". The PCC thus neatly sidestepped the real issue raised by Section 16 – namely whether the material published was in the public interest and thus could be paid for without infringing the Code – and investigated the substantially different matter of whether or not Biggs' actual return was in the public interest.

Challenged on this crucial point on Radio 4's Today programme Lord Wakeham all too revealingly snapped back that: "these fine legal points, or whatever they are, are something that I don't have to get involved in". Indeed, as Catherine Bennett acidly inquired in the following day's Guardian: "what does he do instead? Lick stamps? Water the potplants? Invite young princes and their inferiors to festive champagne receptions?"

Julian Petley analyses the background to a bizarre decision

Lord Wakeham's performance on Today also left one with the strong impression that the PCC hadn't even bothered to enquire just how much the Sun had paid Biggs and his cronies.

Indeed, given that News International's Les Hinton chairs the PCC's Code committee it's a fair bet that the Sun ascertained what the PCC's attitude to its stunt would be well before actually undertaking it, in which case the entire adjudication was, like most of the Commission's activities, little more than window-dressing.

However, the most disturbing aspect of the PCC's adjudication is the extraordinarily craven attitude to government that it betrays. Thus it argues that "the Commission had [sic] to note the role of the British authorities in the newspaper's efforts to return Biggs to justice. It is unlikely that they would have assisted in the return of a fugitive if it had been contrary to the public interest".

Is this the voice of a fearless, independent press – the much-vaunted Fourth Estate? As an

indignant editorial in the Independent felt obliged to point out: "the PCC appears ready to let the Sun escape punishment for its distasteful stunt purely because it was supported by senior politicians".

And just why were they supporting it? In the interests of justice? Hardly – the authorities had long ago ceased to make any serious efforts to get Biggs back. However, with an election looming and the ever-present need to keep the Sun on side, the government suddenly discovered that Biggs' Brazilian sojourn was an outrage to justice and morality. So Robin Cook enables the Sun to fly Biggs home by providing Biggs with an instant passport – all in the 'public interest' of course – and the paper not only remains faithful to New Labour but fawns and simpers over Cook personally in his bid to remain as Foreign Secretary: as an editorial inimitably put it: "thank you Robin. We can see why Tony Blair has decided NOT to move you after the election. When the chips are down, Cookie delivers".

The whole cynical charade, which would probably be denounced as corrupt by British newspapers were it taking place in the hated 'Europe', is then given the blessing of the PCC. No wonder both the Murdoch press and the government are so keen to maintain the present system of 'self-regulation'.

CHALLENGE TO PCC DECISION

As Free Press went to the printers it was learnt that the PCC will face the possibility of a judicial review of their decision to reject a claim of privacy brought by Anna Ford, the BBC journalist. Her claim is based on the new Human Rights Act that contains two potentially conflicting rights. Article 8 says that everyone has 'the right to respect for his private and family life, his home and correspondence'. Article 10 states that everyone 'has the right to freedom of expression ... without interference by public authority'.

If the judge finds in favour of Ford it would for the first time mean that Article 8 carries more legal weight than Article 10 and could lead to the establishment of a privacy law, which in turn would have a profound effect on investigative reporting.

MEDIA MONITOR

CHALLENGING TIMES FOR THE TERRORISM ACT

The Terrorism Act 2000 was pushed through parliament a year ago by the then Home Secretary, Jack Straw. Despite the serious threats it posed to our civil liberties it got little press coverage, which is rather surprising since the legislation poses a significant threat to journalists' ability to protect their sources. Amnesty International expressed concern that 'emergency powers' (which are now written into the Act) 'have been used to intimidate journalists from pursuing certain lines of enquiry which may be embarrassing for the authorities'.

Even less publicity followed the issuing of proscriptions of 21 international political organisations under the Act when it became law this February. Four months later on 28 June the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) lodged a legal appeal against its inclusion on the list. It is the first of the listed organisations to appeal against inclusion and the case was present to the appeal court on behalf of the PKK by human rights lawyer Gareth Pierce.

A campaign has also set up to overturn the banning orders on 21 groups. Its first public meeting is being held in London as we go to press. To find out more contact the Campaign Against Criminalising Communities (CACC) c/o Haldane Society, Conway Hall, 25 Red Lion Square, London WC1R 4RL Tel Stephanie 0796 8787762 or Estella on 020 7250 1315 www.cacc.org.uk

GET INTO THE ACT

The Campaign for Freedom of Information has produced a version of the full text of the UK Freedom of Information Act 2000 which can be downloaded in a single Acrobat PDF or Rich Text Format file. This may be more convenient to use than the version on the Stationery Office website, which requires readers to view more than 30 separate web pages. The Act can be downloaded from: <http://www.foi.org.uk/foiact2000.html>

LONG WAIT FOR FOI

First the good! news. Responsibility for implementing the Freedom of Information Act has been transferred from the Home Office to the Lord Chancellor's Department. Now the bad news, the Lord Irvine has announced that the government will take five years to implement the act (which is what the legislation requires). There had been hopes that he would follow the examples of Canada, New Zealand and Republic of Ireland, who had all introduced open government to central government departments within a year. Answering a question in the House of Lords he said

that..."The scale of the task of preparing central government in the UK for implementation of Freedom of Information is therefore significantly greater than that in Canada, New Zealand and the Republic of Ireland."

ELECTION COVERAGE

The cover of the pre-election issue of the Economist urged 'Vote conservative'. A momentary loss of its class principles? Not at all. The cover picture showed Tony Blair with a Thatcher wig and the word 'conservative' was written with a small c. That's all right then.

SCOTTISH COVER-UP?

Just how well do you have to do in an election before the media starts to take you seriously? That is the question supporters of the Scottish Socialist Party are asking after their election campaign was shunned by most of the main stream Scottish media. Although they collected over 72,000 votes (up by over 63,000 votes of the 1997 election) and stood in all 72 seats, their presence was largely ignored. Best coverage was in The Herald, according to the Party's post election media analysis which appeared in the Scottish Socialist Voice on 15 June.

Robbie Dinwoodie and Murray Ritchie, well-respected political journalists, along with Frances Horsburgh, who reported most of the SSP's press conferences, provided by far the most balanced election coverage. Socialist Voice gave them three out of five. The Scottish Mirror did less well with two of out five, although it did regularly report SSP press conferences and carried one major feature on the party. This was well ahead of its tabloid rivals, the Record and the Sun who scored a round zero each! The Scotsman under its editor-in-chief, Andrew Neil, did provide reasonable coverage of the SSP's campaign and scored two out of five.

The Sunday's were really dire, with Scotland on Sunday earning zero for their non-coverage. Even in its post-election analysis it managed to avoid a single reference to the SSP. The Sunday Mail, Sunday Post and News of the World did better, with each scoring one out of five (so some coverage there then!). And top with 1.5 came the Sunday Times, the Scottish edition providing marginally more balanced coverage than the Sunday Herald (0.5) and Scotland on Sunday (0).

Radio and TV coverage did little better. BBC TV scored 0.5 and was the target of a gag protest, when two women SSP members silently disrupted the hustings debate in protest at the party's exclusion. The only redeeming feature was Newsnight Scotland, which at least covered the launch of the party's manifesto. Scottish TV scored a little better with one out of five. This is because it did allow MSP Tommy Sheridan to participate in a lunchtime poll phone-in on election eve, and interviewed Sheridan the morning after the election. BBC Radio scored two for its coverage in Good Morning Scotland, which according

to Socialist Voice provided by far the fairest coverage on BBCTV and radio. Last but not least Scot FM. The station invited the party to participate in a one hour long round table debate with the other four parties, a unique event for the broadcasting media in this election! So they were awarded two points.

LIBEL LYNCHING

BARRY WHITE ON THE BACKGROUND TO AN IMPORTANT TEST

FOR INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALISM:

Barrick Mining of Canada, whose chairman Peter Munk is one of the wealthiest men in Canada, is suing the Guardian/Observer over an article written by investigative journalist Greg Palast. Called 'Bush family finances: Best democracy money can buy', the article appeared in the London Observer on 26 November 2000. It looked into the activities of several corporations linked to the Bush family, alleged human rights abuses, and first disclosed that some 56,000 Florida voters, most of them African-Americans, had been removed from the voters roles after being wrongly tagged as felons. The article and follow up stories made a big impact in the USA receiving praise from the New York Times to the American Journalism Review. BBC Newsnight ran a feature 'What really happened in Florida' on 16 February 2001.

When news of the libel action broke there was a storm of protest in the United States and Britain. Observer Editor Roger Alton and the Guardian's Alan Rusbridger were swamped with emails, phone calls and letters of support for their firm stand and urging them not to be intimidated by the corporate power and wealth of Barrick. Despite considerable pressure, the paper is maintaining its principled stand, although it could face a long and extremely expensive court case under Britain's infamously archaic libel laws. Pressure is now being put on Barrick and its chairman Peter Munk to withdraw the action.

The CPBF has argued long and hard against the libel laws. They constitute a powerful sanction on the press and as legal aid is not available they remain a powerful weapon in the hands of the rich and powerful.

The laws themselves could well be in conflict with the recently passed Human Rights Act. The fact that legal aid is not available, that awards are sometimes out of proportion, and that they are in potential conflict with the freedom of expression provisions, could mean that the libel laws are past their sell by date.

As Greg Palast himself writes in the Observer (in an unrelated article), 'Here the heat is always on...', on 15 July, 'Whereas US tort and libel law is designed to punish silence and reward revelation, Britain's laws limit discovery and often punish publication. As a result, in Britain it is too often the investigators, not the investigated who end up in hot water'. Prophetic words indeed!

For more about this visit www.gregpalast.com

FAIRNESS AND ACCURACY IN REPORTING

Jeff Cohen came to England in the mid-eighties and visited the CPBF offices at 9 Poland Street. The work of the Campaign inspired him to go back to the States and establish FAIR. The organisation's office in New York now employs ten people and has an annual budget of \$800,000. Jeff was visiting England and we interviewed him about his work on 2 July 2001.

Jeff worked for the American Civil Liberties Union in Los Angeles in the 1980s when they sued the police for spying on non-violent activists – black groups, anti-nuclear power groups, Quakers – and the police settled the case. He used the money to travel, first to Nicaragua and then to Europe while he was working out what he wanted to do next. "I was interested in the media because I had been a publicist for anti-nuclear groups and other activists, and I had all sorts of schemes in my head, like trying to set up a left-wing daily after Gannett had established USA Today. One was to set up a media-watch group, and visiting the London office steered me towards this, and I came up with the name FAIR," he explained.

Back in the Los Angeles Jeff approached foundations to fund the launch of FAIR, and based his proposals on the ideas and work of the CPBF. He was successful and moved to New York where FAIR was launched in summer 1986. Once the group was founded it distinguished itself from right-wing media groups like Accuracy in the Media, AIM. "We were pro-journalists and for their independence, critical of the big media corporations and their stranglehold over the media," he said. The organisation had an impressive list of supporters – actor Ed Asner, singer Jackson Brown, Noam Chomsky, Ben Bagdikian. "It was amazingly easy to win their support. The attitude of many left intellectuals and progressives was 'What took you so long?' The one name that I regret not getting back then was J.F. Stone – I'm sure he would have joined our advisory board but he wanted to see what we were about and he died a year or so after. We had an impressive group of advisers who were happy to lend their names because of the new wave of the corporate takeover of our media and the media cheerleading, the pro-Reagan propaganda in the media, was driving people nuts."

When FAIR formed, journalists in the mainstream media welcomed its existence, but

dismissed the idea that there was a corporate takeover of the media. "In the late eighties they used to say 'You're so extreme about that' but from around 1994 onwards the same TV producers and print journalists would come up to me and say 'You guys were prophetic, but it's worse than you predicted it would be'."

Jeff is positive about the impact the group has had in the States. "We have created a media reform movement in our country. A movement did not exist before FAIR. The idea that you can talk back to the media, that you can attack the media and criticise it, has taken root. Our model was 'don't take the media lying down – talk back to it. It's in terms of activism that we've had our biggest impact. We can also shake mainstream consciousness with our reports – we did it with Nightline in the late 80s, and we've just done it with the report on Fox News Channel."

"There is a vibrant media reform movement but I don't want to overplay it – compared with the powerful Washington lobbyists, we're tiny and we're not linked to a political party. Indeed both Republicans and Democrats voted for the biggest piece of communications legislation – the 1996 Telecommunications Act which some call the Time Warner enrichment Act."

Jeff thinks the change of Presidency from Clinton to Bush won't have much impact in terms of media reform. "This may be controversial, but I don't

think it makes much difference. Clinton had people at the Federal Communications Commission who talked the rhetoric about being concerned about media consolidation but gave the media industry ninety-five percent of what they wanted. Bush has appointed as head of the FCC Conan Powell's son, Michael Powell and he doesn't bother with the rhetoric and he'll give them ninety-nine per cent of what they want. The good thing is now we don't have the rhetoric, people are starting to write more critically about these issues. In a weird kind of way, the fact that Bush is in the White House and we have Michael Powell running the FCC could help us raise the issues."

Jeff is also critical about the democratic impact of the Internet. "I'm old enough to remember that the new media in the late seventies was cable and the techno-panacea folks were saying what are you worried about? When

Fifteen years ago, the CPBF provided the inspiration for FAIR – a thorn in the side of America's media moguls. Free Press spoke to founder Jeff Cohen.



cable television comes there's going to be eighty channels and there will be a labor channel, a peace movement channel, a consumer rights channel for Ralph Nader. People believed cable television would set us free but the problem now and then is not so much channels, but who owns the channels. The corporations have taken over cable television and if you look at all the channels they are owned by five companies. The number of channels doesn't matter, the issue is diversity of ownership. Now with the Internet the same arguments are being used – don't worry about regulation, you can set up your own website, people say but the most heavily used websites are linked to the big corporate media interests who can bring eyeballs to them. Of course there are wonderful websites and it's a great medium for activists to communicate through, but the giant corporations still have a stranglehold over the medium and the majority of people go to them."

One of Jeff's concerns is the uncritical coverage in the mainstream media of the spate of

mega-mergers that was symbolised by the AOL Time Warner group. "When Viacom took over CBS the New York Times the next day had seven or eight articles on the issues, but not one raised issues of public concern. Indeed one report commented on the quaint days from the 1970s when it bothered people when companies owned too many media properties. It still bothers people. The media cover these mergers in glowing positive terms, but they are bad for democracy and diversity."

Jeff now takes a more back seat role in the running of FAIR but the organisation remains a strong and effective media watchdog in the States. An impressive achievement.

FAIR HITS TARGET

"I challenge anybody to show me an example of bias in Fox News Channel."

– Rupert Murdoch (Salon, 1st March, 2001)
A good example of the work FAIR does is, and the impact it has, is its in-depth study of Rupert

Murdoch's Fox News Channel, which backed up the assertion that it had an extraordinary right-wing tilt and was the most biased of the US news channels, with detailed analysis.

Fox News Channel wraps itself up in slogans of journalistic objectivity like 'Fair and balanced' and 'We report, you decide' but the FAIR study of one of the network's political news shows, Special Report with Brit Hume, found that of 56 partisan guests in a five month period, 50 were Republicans and six were Democrats. In other words, 89 per cent of guests with a party affiliation were Republican.

The Fox News Channel's editorial philosophy revolves around the idea that the network is an antidote to supposedly 'liberal' mainstream media like CNN so FAIR compared Special Report with CNN's Wolf Blitzer Reports over the same period. The facts showed that the programme had a modest but significant tilt towards Republicans.

The FAIR report, compiled by Seth Ackerman, has taken up Rupert Murdoch's challenge to provide the evidence of systematic bias. The network has had a strategy of aggressive denial towards any suggestion of a conservative tilt, and many commentators have accepted the network's own self-assessment of its performance. What gives the report credibility isn't just the statistical analysis to demonstrate bias, but also the detail on the personnel who run the network – themselves conservatives and Republicans. Fox's founder and president, Roger Ailes, is a veteran political operative from the Nixon and Regan campaigns and was responsible for crafting the elder Bush's media strategy in the 1988 presidential race which destroyed the credibility of Democrat candidate, Michael Dukakis.

Another key figure is John Moody, Fox's senior vice-president for news and editorial, who said in October 1999, "There's a certain sameness to the news on the Big Three (networks) and CNN ... America is bad, corporations are bad, animal species should be protected, and every cop is a racist killer. That's where 'fair and balanced' comes in. We don't think all corporations are bad, every forest should be saved, every government spending program is good. We're going to be more inquisitive."

The FAIR report is packed with detail, and the case it presents so powerful, that it was given prominence in the New York Times and other US newspapers. Interestingly enough, Robert Zimmerman, a Fox News Channel spokesman, said the network had no comment because FAIR 'lacks credibility' and had a 'bias that is well known throughout the industry'. (New York Times, 2 July, 2001) Praise indeed.

Details of FAIR on www.fair.org

US MEDIA SOURCES

Two good sources for information on the US media are Columbia Journalism Review (www.cjr.org) and the online magazine salon: www.salon.com

Neil Hickey has a good background piece, 'Unshackling Big Media' in the CJR on the work of Michael Powell, who has been chair of the FCC since January and is taking a critical look at the limits on media ownership with a view to jettisoning those that don't fulfil his simple guideline: 'Validate or eliminate. Simple as that'.

Hickey identifies the two targets for the media industry lobbyists. One ownership limit prevents ownership of a newspaper or broadcast station in the same market area (unless you owned them before the rule came into effect, or unless you persuaded the FCC that one or the other was about to go bust). The other puts a cap on ownership of television stations that collectively reach more than 35 per cent of the nation's households.

Hickey also points out that the battle to carve out ever larger and more powerful media empires is not reported on for newspaper readers and TV-news watchers. He concludes his piece by saying in future there will be fewer limits on media ownership than there used to be, 'and one final question: Will the media explain to readers and viewers why that matters?'

Salon is running a series on the consolidation and power of ownership in the media landscape. Eric Boehlert has a good piece, 'One Big Happy Channel?' which demonstrates how, as a result of the 1996 Telecommunications Act the radio industry has seen an unprecedented change of ownership so that two companies, Clear Channel and Infinity, now dominate the nation's commercial radio stations. The result, many observers feel, has been the degradation of commercial radio as a creative, independent medium.

He thinks the threat of the same happening to TV will be more consolidation, more homogenisation 'and, of course, more profits for the few at the top'.

The first article in the series The Media Borg, by Scott Rosenberg also looks interesting too. It looks at the way the Internet has developed and suggests 'We're reaping the worst of all possible worlds, networked chaos and monopolistic consolidation'.

SHOULD ITN LOSE ITS MONOPOLY ON COMMERCIAL TV NEWS?

"A RAGBAG partnership crafted from desperation" was how ITN reacted to the rival Channel 3 News bid for the ITV news contract. To describe thus a consortium of America's CBS and Bloomberg, Chrysalis Media, Ulster Television and British Sky Broadcasting, smacks of desperation too; Sky's head of news Nick Pollard said it showed ITN was rattled, and I think he was right.

As a producer at ITN, it always amazed me how Stewart Purvis, the chief executive, would boast how ITN could afford to do the news cheaper; whenever the ITV contract came up for renewal, we would all be warned in solemn terms how we couldn't expect a pay increase, because the company had to bid lower than Sky to ensure we kept the contract.

This was despite the fact that neither Sky, nor the outsider Reuters, had even applied to the Independent Television Commission to become a "designated news provider" – i.e., one with the financing and equipment to provide a news service. Purvis, supposedly a canny businessman and not just a lucky hack, even disclosed that ITN could afford to cut the price of its news service to ITV by about £12m a year. We wondered if this wasn't giving the competition a little too much help.

But mostly the staff felt loyal to the ITN name: a fine news organisation with forty years of television journalism of the highest standard. If it was a bit un-gentlemanly that

**BRUCE WHITEHEAD,
MEDIACHANNEL NEWS EDITOR**

out of the entire terrestrial commercial TV network (ITV and Channels Four and Five) we had a complete monopoly on news, well, what did that matter; as the company's slogan put it, everything we did was news.

I believe ITN has lost the automatic right to keep all three channels. It has shown its contempt for serious news with a downmarket slide in the quality of its ITV bulletins: from the afternoon onwards they are now dominated by crime, showbiz and sport. Even sports coverage attracted charges of bias: when ITV grabbed Formula One from the BBC, viewers saw a massive corresponding increase in the amount of motor racing coverage in ITN news bulletins. Not exactly how the daily news digest should be determined, eh Stewart?

This is not entirely ITN's fault, and CBS and Sky may turn out to have even more dodgy news values. Sky is now in the forefront of Rupert Murdoch's plans to dominate satellite TV, and his papers showed how supportive they can be to a Labour government when it suits them. But Sky – which after all is co-owned by Vivendi and others, not just Murdoch – has proven that it can churn out

rolling news from AP, Reuters and the Press Association just as seamlessly as ITN does (and probably with more style).

So perhaps it's time to give someone else the chance to improve the quality of ITV news, in the interests of competition and diversity. Although Sir Trevor McDonald is a fine newsreader, too often his was almost the only non-white face I saw in the ITN newsroom, or on-screen. Whichever service ITV chooses must better reflect the nation's make up.

True, many of Sky's news executives are disgruntled former ITN journalists who took the Murdoch shilling when ITN couldn't match Sky's staff perks – BMWs, free cable etc. But the change could do ITV a power of good, with a shake up of the unhealthy and cosy relationship between the network and its poodle news arm that has dragged on for too long.

Channel 3 News should be awarded the ITV news contract for a two year trial. If they perform well, with for example, better foreign coverage and more background analysis of conflict news for example; and if Mr Murdoch stays out of the newsroom, then the new Ofcom watchdog might actually be able to announce a success story. Then, the government's communications policy might get back on track, without having to offer concessions to Rupert Murdoch on cross-media ownership.

attention US groups are showing.

The regulatory framework for UK commercial broadcasting, while flawed, has worked effectively, overall, to prevent undue commercial influence. The ITC codes provide detailed rules and guidance on the separation of programmes and advertising. But the regulator faces enormous commercial pressure. Its review has been prompted by pressure to allow ITV to further cross-promote ITV Digital (née ONdigital) as costs spiral, take-up for digital terrestrial (DTT) stagnates, and the Government's date for switching-off analogue recedes.

The ITC consultation identifies three 'disbenefits' of cross-promotion as reasons to regulate: increased promotional 'clutter', threats to editorial integrity and unfair competition issues. But balancing 'costs and benefits', it proposes liberalising rules to allow greater cross-promotion within, as well as between, programmes. We endorse the proposed limit of 90 seconds allowed for announcements (currently there's no limit set) but argue that limits must apply to licensed cable and satellite services too, not just channels 3-5 as proposed. The ITC consultation can be found at (www.itc.org.uk/news/current_consultations/index.asp) and the CPBF response on our website (www.cpbfdemon.co.uk).

SUBTLE SELLING

Jonathan Hardy on the background to the recent Independent Television Commission consultation on cross-media promotion.

The ability to cross-promote products and services has been a powerful incentive driving media mergers. In the United States, where this dynamic is most advanced, the results have been increasingly sophisticated with systematic marketing effort (synergy), more media promotion, and more surreptitious advertising as promotional material burrows into editorial content. Increasingly too, there have been innovative challenges mounted on behalf of citizens and consumers.

US groups have campaigned for product placement in films and TV to be acknowledged in credits. Earlier this month, a group called Citizens for Truth in Movie Advertising began legal action against major Hollywood studios claiming that film critics' opinions had been compromised by junkets and hospitality. The resulting 'reviews', used for promotional purposes, constituted false or misleading advertisements the group argued, thus breaching California law.

Here, the Independent Television Commission (ITC) has finally initiated a consultation on cross-promotion in commercial television. The consequences for us as citizens and viewers warrant the kind of

LETTER

I am a media teacher in Further Education. It is evident that most students do not understand the issues around public service broadcasting, having been brought up in the age of deregulated media. Most however, do have a degree of cynicism about much of the content of satellite and cable tv. At the same time they regard terrestrial tv as pretty dull and not worth the licence fee. This might suggest that psb is simply not serving their needs sufficiently. I wonder if sufficient research has been done on young people's attitudes to psb? I'm not aware of any. When carefully explained to them, the issues around psb are usually largely accepted by my students, especially when the costs of commercial subscription-based tv are put to them! Most are very wary of pay-per-view.

My own view is that the BBC should be allowed to produce a plan for developing the kind of digital services that will genuinely enable it to expend its public service function, and be free to increase the licence fee to suit. I'd suggest a figure of around £300, with greater concessions, would enable the BBC to genuinely compete against commercial broadcasters and enable it to develop minority channels, educational materials, keep hold of 'national interest' sports, regenerate the British film industry, and so on. In particular I'd like to see money ploughed into educational resources. This is a national asset. Isn't it crazy that school teachers spend hours creating resources or buying them from private companies when they could be made readily available? BBC Online is, I understand, one of the world's most visited sites. This just shows the kind of thing that can be achieved by a strong public sector in the media. I have a fear that the Communications White paper will weaken the BBC further, especially as the government does not wish to meaningfully tackle the rampant conglomeration and globalisation surrounding us.

Is this pie in the sky, or is there a lack of political will, an ideological commitment to the private sphere – or are there issues to do with international free trade laws and agreements that genuinely tie the government's hands?

Paul Wilkinson

Virtual Murdoch: Reality Wars on the Information Highway

by Neil Chenoweth, Secker and Warburg £18.99

This is both an informative and an irritating book. The irritations are to do with the odd slips like the Westland Helicopter Company becomes Westmoreland; former NGA members will be surprised to read that SOGAT was the only print union at Wapping, and so on. When the subject of the book roams the globe in pursuit of the next deal and the goal of a global media empire an author has to absorb an enormous amount of detail, but surely such slips could have been corrected.

The book's author is with the Australian Financial Review and its focus (and strength) is that it concentrates on Murdoch the deal-maker, the financial wheeling and dealing, and the battles between powerful media empires. There's not much in this book on the personal side of the Murdoch's life or his family, except where it bears down on issues to do with finance.

There is one fascinating insight into Murdoch's years at Oxford University when he became acquainted with game theory. Chenoweth explains, "Game theory grew out of the study of poker games and chess. It challenged the classical doctrine that economic outcomes were attributed to impersonal forces. Instead it looked at the role of individual people, who it could be assumed could be mendacious, nasty and stupid. At one level, game theory seemed to turn everything around, with its implicit suggestion that the successful player in business or politics was the one who ignored convention and social expectations, who broke unwritten rules, who did what no one else in the game was prepared to do. It was what Rupert Murdoch would always do well."

In one sense, this idea of Rupert the risk taker, breaking the rules and battering at the old monopolies, is an attractive narrative. But of course it doesn't really get to heart of what makes Rupert's empire run, and the rather less attractive reality of the use of power – financial, political and media – to ensure favourable outcomes. Chenoweth deals with some pretty seedy episodes, from the time Rupert made his first forays outside of Australia to the present spectacle of the conflicting interests that need to be smoothed over whilst running a global media company. Remember the incident over the Chris Patten book?

Nearly all of the incidents covered in the book will be familiar to students of Murdoch, but it is useful to be reminded of them, and also to have the added detail that Chenoweth brings to the narrative. For example the takeover of BSB by Sky reminds us that both organisations were in dire straits but it was Murdoch who ended up running the show through his appointee, Sam Chisholm. I thought the sections dealing with Murdoch's operations in the States were particularly informative. However the desire to focus on the financial aspects of Murdoch's media empire does tend to give the book a rather neutral, non-judgemental tone. Even when he is analysing the energy News Corporation puts into avoiding paying tax on its massive global profits there is little sense of condemnation about the ethics (or lack of) that allow such practices.

There are at least two other books on Murdoch that I know of which are being actively researched and written. His importance to anyone interested in the interplay between media power, high finance and political power is obvious and the more we know about his operations and business practices the better informed we are to insist that politicians should be cautious about doing deals to ensure favourable media coverage.

The Media Guardian recently identified the top 100 people who control our media, and top of the list was Rupert. Intriguingly ninth on the list was the Chancellor, Gordon Brown. It appears Murdoch spent several hours with him at a meeting in June. According to the Guardian, 'the big issues – whether to permit a single ITV, or to allow companies to own a broader range of interests – will ultimately be determined by the chancellor'. Whether it's the UK, China, the USA or Australia the approach is the same. Murdoch's media power has given easy access to the centres of political power, and Chenoweth's book reminds us that in the end everything is subordinate to Murdoch's imperative to develop a dominant global group.

Granville Williams

COMMUNICATIONS BILL EVENTS

● Monday 1 October, Brighton

'Communications Revolution – Who Benefits?' Fringe meeting at Labour Party Annual Conference with Julian Petley, CPBF; Tony Lennon, President, BECTU; Christine Kent, Public Voice; and journalist Roy Greenslade. 12.45pm, Queen's Hotel, 1-5 Kings Street, Brighton.

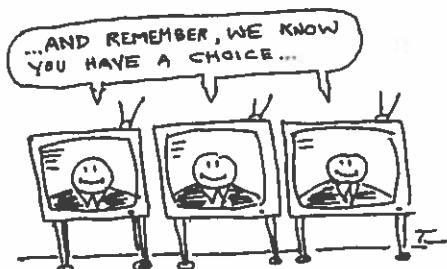
● Saturday 13 October, Manchester

'Communications Revolution – Who Benefits?' Public Meeting 10.30am-1pm; Cornerhouse, 70 Oxford Street, Manchester.

Communications revolution: who benefits?

Media issues raised by the forthcoming Communications Bill

Tom O'Malley



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WE'VE MOVED

The CPBF has moved to new offices. We're now at **Second Floor, Vi and Garner Smith House, 23 Orford Road, Walthamstow, London E17 9NL. Tel/fax: 020 8 5 21 5 9 3 2.** The move has caused some disruption to postal deliveries and redirected mail is taking some time to come through, so please bear with us if you have posted items in the past six weeks.

US regulator ready to drop controls

The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) is about to wave through a number of changes to merger legislation that will herald a massive consolidation of market power, according to a recent article in USA Today (10 July) 'Key media ownership limits are expected to be relaxed, or eliminated, as they come under attack in the courts and at the FCC,' it says. TV and radio stations, cable systems and newspapers want permission to grow bigger to compete with massive rivals such as AOLTime Warner and Viacom.

The move is criticised by media watchdogs who say that the changes could mean less spending on newsgathering, less diversity and rising costs for advertisers. With New Labour intent on setting up a UK version of the FCC, namely Ofcom, it could only be a matter of time before similar pressures are brought to bear here.

Free Press is edited by Granville Williams for the National Council

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