

FREE Press

No. 124, September–October 2001

£1

Journal of the Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom

IN THIS issue we print two pieces from our sister organisation in America, FAIR, on the awful events of 11 September. We believe they provide the necessary perspective as sections of the media ratchet up the rhetoric of war, revenge and retaliation.

The destruction in Washington and New York was brought home vividly by the images replayed on our TV screens and the dramatic pictures spread across special supplements in our newspapers. It is right for us to express our sense of horror at the scale of the devastation, and to convey our sorrow and sympathy to the bereaved.

However there also needs to be a clear analysis and understanding of why these horrifying attacks occurred. This is where problems arise because many who condemn utterly the actions of those who caused the carnage in the USA also want to ask other uncomfortable questions about US foreign policy, past and present. In the present emotionally wrought climate this is difficult but it is necessary.

That's why it was unfortunate that Greg Dyke, the BBC Director-General, issued an unprecedented public apology after BBC1 screened a live edition of Question Time on 11 September. Some audience members claimed America had brought the tragedy on itself by pursuing an 'anti-Arab, pro-Israeli policy' in the Middle East.

They have a case, but it isn't one that gets heard widely in the US or UK media. John Pilger in the *New Statesman* (17 September) writes, 'A friend of mine, a distinguished photojournalist, told me how he had stood up at a debate on media censorship in New York the other day and asked why Israel's oppression of an Arab nation, a construct of American power, was not recognised

in American political life and the media. He was called an anti-Semite.

It is not quite as bad in this country. The censorship is more subtle: the collaborative silence of the Jewish establishment, together with the BBC's promotion of moral equivalence between oppressor and oppressed while adhering essentially to Israel's and CNN's news agenda.'

Two of our most powerful media owners – Rupert Murdoch and the recently enobled Lord Conrad Black – have close business links with Israel and, according to Sam Kiley, the former Middle East correspondent for *The Times*, his reports were routinely censored in Israel's favour.

Of course, the attacks cannot be explained solely by the US-Israel connection. The other aspect deserving attention is the phenomenon known as 'blowback' where a policy devised by a government and its intelligence service rebounds on them. This is particularly important in relation to the US role in Afghanistan when, during the Soviet occupation of the country, billions of dollars were spent funding and training the mujahedin, and in the post-Soviet years the US encouraged the arming of a tribal militia to end the misrule of the mujahedin. The full story, and the role of the CIA in it, needs public exposure. One excellent contribution to this is the book, *Unholy Wars: Afghanistan, America and International terrorism* by John K. Cooley (Pluto Press). It deserves to be widely read.

The media in the coming period of international tension have a vital responsibility to explore these issues, give people the facts, and highlight the uncomfortable contradictions in US foreign policy. They should not be cheerleading those politicians and other voices that unthinkingly call for revenge.

The last US retaliation



By JEFF COHEN

NOTHING will ever be the same, we're told, after the cataclysmic terrorism of 9.11. Yet some things seem unchanged in the media – such as the pundit clamour for retaliation against someone, somewhere, fast.

"Bomb somebody, goddamnit!" roared a talk radio host in New York. We've been here before, almost exactly three years ago. In the wake of terror bombings of two US embassies in Africa, President Clinton was urged to take decisive action, and on August 20, 1998, he ordered missile attacks on two targets purportedly linked to Osama bin

Laden, the accused mastermind of the bombings.

One target of operation "Infinite Reach" was bin Laden's paramilitary camp in Afghanistan. "The US picked the highly accurate cruise missile for the strikes against the Afghan camp," reported CNN's military correspondent Jamie McIntyre, "because of their ability to fly with pinpoint accuracy."

One of the missiles was so inaccurate it hit the wrong country, Pakistan, several hundred miles off-course.

The other target was the Al Shifa factory in Sudan, alleged by the Clinton administration to be linked to bin Laden and to be producing chemical warfare agents. The factory was destroyed and workers there were killed and maimed.

That night, Sen. John McCain appeared on five national TV programs in less than three hours to endorse the President's action. The next day, the missile attacks were

supported on the editorial pages of America's leading dailies.

But soon, Western professionals who had worked at the Sudan plant began to speak credibly of the plant being just what the Sudanese government claimed it was: a civilian factory producing a major share of the pharmaceuticals for an impoverished country. Western journalists who rushed to the scene of the US missile attack found medicine, but no security features that one would expect at a military or weapons facility.

Sudan's government offered journalists unfettered access to the area. The US government said that it had obtained a suspicious soil sample from near the plant nine months before the cruise attack.

But as *New York Times* reporter James Risen noted in an exhaustive study a year

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BY NORMAN SOLOMAN

WE STARE at TV screens and try to comprehend the suffering in the aftermath of terrorism. Much of what we see is ghastly and all too real; terrible anguish and sorrow.

At the same time, we're witnessing an onslaught of media deception. "The greatest triumphs of propaganda have been accomplished, not by doing something, but by refraining from doing," Aldous Huxley observed long ago. "Great is truth, but still greater, from a practical point of view, is silence about truth."

Silence, rigorously selective, pervades the media coverage of recent days. For policy-makers in Washington, the practical utility of that silence is enormous. In response to the mass murder committed by hijackers, the righteousness of US military action is clear – as long as double standards go unmentioned.

While rescue crews braved intense smoke and grisly rubble, ABC News analyst Vincent Cannistraro helped to put it all in perspective for millions of TV viewers.

Cannistraro is a former high-ranking official of the Central Intelligence Agency who was in charge of the CIA's work with the contras in Nicaragua during the early 1980s. After moving to the National Security Council in 1984, he became a supervisor of covert aid to Afghan guerrillas.

In other words, Cannistraro has a long history of assisting terrorists – first, contra soldiers who routinely killed Nicaraguan civilians; then, mujahedin rebels in Afghanistan ... like Osama bin Laden. How can a long-time associate of terrorists now be credibly denouncing "terrorism"? It's easy. All that's required is for media coverage to remain in a kind of history-free zone that has no use for any facets of reality that are not presently convenient to acknowledge.

In his book 1984, George Orwell described the mental dynamics: "The process has to be conscious, or it would not be carried out with sufficient precision, but it also has to be unconscious, or it would bring with it a feeling of falsity and hence of guilt ... To tell deliberate lies while

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after the Sudan factory had been leveled, "officials throughout the government raised doubts up to the eve of the attack about whether the United States had sufficient information linking the factory to either chemical weapons or to Mr. bin Laden."

Risen reported that intelligence analysts in the State Department were drafting an internal report saying the cruise attack on

Terrorism, television and the desire for revenge

genuinely believing in them, to forget any fact that has become inconvenient, and then, when it becomes necessary again, to draw it back from oblivion for just so long as it is needed, to deny the existence of objective reality and all the while to take account of the reality which one denies – all this is indispensably necessary."

Secretary of State Colin Powell denounced "people who feel that with the destruction of buildings, with the murder of people, they can somehow achieve a political purpose." He was describing the

Few eyebrows went up when Time magazine declared in its September 10 edition: 'The US is at one of those fortunate – and rare – moments in history when it can shape the world.' That attitude can only bring us a succession of disasters.

terrorists who had struck his country hours earlier. But Powell was also aptly describing a long line of top officials in Washington.

It would be very unusual to hear a comment about that sort of hypocrisy on any major TV network in the United States. Yet surely US policy-makers have believed that they could "achieve a political purpose" – with "the destruction of buildings, with the murder of people" – when launching missiles at Baghdad or Belgrade.

Nor are key national media outlets now doing much to shed light on American assaults that were touted as anti-terrorist "retaliation" – such as the firing of 13 cruise missiles, one day in August 1998, at the Al Shifa pharmaceutical plant in Khartoum,

the Sudan factory had not been justified, but the report was killed by higher ups.

What's not in dispute is that Sudan government officials forced Osama bin Laden to leave their country in 1996. Or that the Al Shifa factory had been purchased by a Sudanese businessman five months before the missile attack – a fact that was unknown to the US at the time it targeted the plant.

Three years after the US government may have killed and injured innocent people on

Sudan. That attack, depriving an impoverished country of desperately needed medical drugs, was an atrocity committed (in the words of political analyst Noam Chomsky) "with no credible pretext, destroying half its pharmaceutical supplies and probably killing tens of thousands of people."

No one knows the exact number of lives lost due to the severe disruption of Sudan's meagre drug supply, Chomsky adds, "because the US blocked an inquiry at the United Nations and no one cares to pursue it."

Media scrutiny of atrocities committed by the US government is rare. Only some cruelties merit the spotlight. Only some victims deserve empathy. Only certain crimes against humanity are worth our tears.

"This will be a monumental struggle of good versus evil," President Bush proclaimed. The media reactions to such rhetoric have been overwhelmingly favourable.

But the heart-wrenching voices now on the USA's airwaves

are no less or more important than voices that we have never heard. Today, the victims of terrorism in America deserve our deep compassion. So do the faraway victims of America – human beings whose humanity has gone unrecognised by US media.

Underlying that lack of recognition is a nationalistic arrogance shared by press and state. Few eyebrows went up when Time magazine declared in its September 10 edition: "The US is at one of those fortunate – and rare – moments in history when it can shape the world." That attitude can only bring us a succession of disasters. Norman Solomon's latest book is *The Habits of Highly Deceptive Media*. This is his column from FAIR's *Media Beat*

foreign soil in a misguided "retaliation against terrorism," media voices are again calling for a quick and forceful reprisal.

Outrage is the natural and appropriate response to the mass murder of September 11. But media should not be glibly encouraging retaliatory violence without remembering that US retaliation has killed innocent civilians abroad, violated international law and done little to make us safer. Jeff Cohen is the founder of FAIR, the US media watch group based in Manhattan.

WITHOUT COMMENT

'Commentators Are Quick to Beat Their Pens Into Swords'

HOWARD KURTZ

WASHINGTON POST 13 SEPTEMBER

AMERICA'S columnists, some of them at least, are ready to go to war.

From the safety of their word processors, they are urging the Bush administration to bomb someone – anyone – who can be tied to Tuesday's devastating attack on the World Trade centre and the Pentagon ... Tapping into the nation's revulsion, some armchair warriors have opened rhetorical fire.

The New York Post's Steve Dunleavy: 'The response to this unimaginable 21st century Pearl Harbor should be simple as it is swift – kill the bastards ... A gunshot between the eyes, blow them to smithereens, poison them if you have to ... As for cities and countries that host these worms, bomb them into basketball courts.'

Similar declarations filled the airwaves. Former secretary of state Lawrence Eagleburger told CNN: 'There is only one way to deal with people like this, and that is to kill some of them even if they are not immediately directly involved in this thing.'

Journalism has played the provocateur's role since the days when publisher William Randolph Hearst helped nudge the country into the Spanish-American war. But that trend has been amplified by television commentators, says New Yorker media writer Ken Auletta.

'Their opinions are unhinged from the facts, and that has become the culture of talking-head television,' he says. 'They make pronouncements ... But the culture of television is never to show complexity or grey.'

Keep calm – and complain!

Urges Presswise director Mike Jempson

THE emotional turmoil generated by the calculated atrocity in New York and Washington has left most people feeling vulnerable and unsure. The pundits have been in overdrive and amidst the welter of confusing analysis and bellicose rhetoric it should hardly come as a surprise that some people will embark upon their own crusades against perceived 'enemies'.

All the more reason for the media to watch carefully the language and the messages they publish. And for members of the public to complain if they think coverage is overstepping the mark and inflaming public feeling. The Daily Telegraph and the London Evening Standard were among papers reported to the Press Complaints Commission in the immediate aftermath of the terrorist outrage. Fifteen complaints were received in the week following the attacks.

In the main the print and broadcast media have been exemplary in their coverage, but the backlash has begun with a vengeance in the UK, with attacks on mosques, physical assaults and verbal abuse directed against Muslims, and especially Afghans and Pakistanis. Feelings whipped up against refugees and asylum seekers over the last few years have already led to murder, arson and assaults. The massacre in America threatens to fuel more violence.

By Tuesday 18 September the Mirror was urging 'STOP THIS MADNESS' as reports of random attacks on British Muslims and foreigners increased. And the Commission for Racial Equality issued its own warning to the Press: "Journalists and editors must balance news value with the need to portray all communities in the UK fairly and avoid coverage which is based on racial stereotypes or unfounded misconceptions."

The day before the attack on New York the Sun trumpeted 'One million illegals hiding in Britain!' Over the next few days most of the papers ran stories about Muslim fundamentalists and alleged extremist

organisations in the UK with connections to Bin Laden. Attacks on innocent people soon followed. Afghan refugees were reported to be quitting the Red Cross Centre at Sangatte near Calais because of hostility from other inmates.

The Sun had responded with an editorial headed: 'Islam is not an evil religion'. Its words of caution to those seeking to blame all Muslims were promptly undermined by a Sunday Express article headed: 'Spin doctors ordered to spread the message that Islam is not evil: Blair fear new wave of race riots in Britain'.

Another story in the same edition claimed 'Bin Laden fanatics' secret London cell', identifying a house in London's Kilburn area as the base for a London cell of Egyptian Islamic Jihad – three years ago.

These are dangerous times for everyone, and the threat of 'war' and military strikes against Afghanistan will generate an even more acute refugee crisis around the world.

When feelings are already inflamed by the images of death and destruction, there is a natural tendency to remain silent rather than criticise when public feelings are already inflamed by images of death and destruction.

Especially when the BBC was forced to apologise, after a furore generated by the newspapers, for allowing a live audience including British Muslims to express their views openly. But silence gives succour to those willing to stoke up race hatred.

PressWise and the RAM project urges anyone who considers that newspaper stories, or radio and TV broadcasts might encourage attacks on innocent refugees, asylum-seekers, British Muslims or anyone else to MAKE AN IMMEDIATE COMPLAINT.

Addresses and contact numbers for all the media regulators can be found on our website www.presswise.org.uk. The PressWise Trust is available to help those who wish to complain, and is willing to intervene directly with editors.

Campaign calls time on libel laws

THE CPBF has called for the wholesale reform of the libel laws following the settlement between Guardian Newspapers Ltd and Barrick Gold and its chair Peter Munk, following the settlement in Open Court on Tuesday 31 July (see 'Libel Lynching' in Free Press 123).

The case was brought by the mining company over an article by US journalist Greg Palast entitled 'Best Democracy money can buy' which appeared in The Observer on 26 November 2000.

In a letter to Roger Alton The Observer's editor and Alan Rusbridger editor of The Guardian CPBF chair Julian Petley wrote:

Dear Roger,
Barrick Gold Corporation

I read with great interest your article entitled 'Barrick Gold Corporation' in the Business Section of the most recent edition of the Observer.

Ever since it was first established in 1979, the Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom has recognised the gagging effect the libel laws on reporting and has repeatedly argued for their reform. You will be only too aware that these laws enabled Lord Archer not only to avoid justice for over a decade but actually to walk off with a handsome libel settlement against the Daily Star in 1987. As Andrew Rawnsley forcefully pointed out in the Observer following Archer's conviction, the use of these laws by Archer effectively gagged any further press investigations for many years, until the recent court case and his subsequent conviction. Robert Maxwell used them for exactly the same ends.

We have a number of concerns about the outcome of the Barrick case, which is a serious setback to investigative journalism. The deletion of the story from a US based website is especially disturbing and we would question what right a court in the UK has over a US based internet service provider to secure removal.

Your newspaper group has an extremely positive record on exposing corruption and wrongdoings. Your reporting of the Hamilton affair and your courageous stand over the libel action brought by Jonathan Aitken were landmarks along the road towards press freedom. During and after the passage of Freedom of Information legislation, the

Guardian's 'Open Up' campaign has put it streets ahead of the rest of the industry in pressing for greater access to information, both in the UK and elsewhere in Europe. Your support for the Global Internet Liberty Campaign has also been exemplary.

As an organisation campaigning for press reform, and indeed for media reform in general, we do from time to time have our differences with your newspaper group. But we strongly believe that, following the Barrick case, the time has come to launch a vigorous campaign for the wholesale reform of the libel laws. In addition we believe that the current legislation needs to be tested against a number of the provisions in the Human Rights Act, in particular those concerning the right to a fair trial (Article 5) and to freedom of expression (Article 10).

Speaking at the annual Dillon's Lecture at City University in London shortly after the Hamilton and Aitken cases, Alan Rusbridger called for three specific changes to the libel laws. Firstly, a judge should never be allowed to dismiss the jury and make the final decision themselves, as happened in the Aitken case. Secondly, defendants in libel cases should no longer have, in effect, to prove their innocence; as in every other type of legal case, libel defendants should be regarded as innocent until proven guilty, and the onus of providing the proof should rest fairly and squarely on the plaintiff. Lastly, there is the matter of 'qualified privilege' which, if accepted by the courts, would allow the media to report, without fear of defamation, on certain matters of genuine public interest.

With the Barrick, Aitken and Archer cases now behind us we need to move forward and to get to grips with the need for the wholesale reform of the libel laws. We are asking you, therefore, in this open letter, to follow the success of your 'Open Up' campaign with a campaign to reform the libel laws, a campaign which we, and undoubtedly many other organisations in the UK and beyond concerned with media freedom, would wholeheartedly support.

Yours sincerely,
Julian Petley
Chair

■ We received a reply to the letter just as we went to press.

The McLibel battle continues

By **Dave Morris and Helen Steel**
(McLibel defendants)

FOOD is central to our lives, yet ordinary people have virtually no control over its production and distribution. The food industry is dominated by multinational companies who for their own profits exploit consumers, workers, the world's natural resources and billions of farmed animals. The way we eat, and even the way we think about food is being manipulated by these powerful institutions and their sophisticated marketing campaigns.

In the 1980s, to expose the reality behind such propaganda, London Greenpeace began campaigning against the expanding fast food industry, in particular the McDonald's corporation – one of the most powerful and influential global companies. As a result, in 1990 McDonald's issued writs for libel against us.

Libel laws are notorious. A defendant is guilty until proven innocent, despite facing having to pay huge potential damages and the draconian threat to freedom of speech. Cases are massively expensive, complex and completely stacked in favour of the prosecution. There is no legal aid. Right to jury trial can be denied. Most media material is subjected to 'legalling' by lawyers – generally anything critical of any institution or individual who it is believed might sue is removed. The public have barely any idea of all this. Most libel suits result in a pre-trial climbdown by the defence and a grovelling and false 'apology' which is then paraded around in Stalinist fashion by the victor as an example of

how squeaky clean they supposedly are. This constitutes a form of mass censorship, carried out in secret. Its only beneficiaries are the rich and powerful. We believe such censorship has to be successfully challenged and defied.

A very active 'McLibel' support and defiance campaign was established. McDonald's predicted that the case would last '3-4 weeks', but instead it was turned into an extensive public tribunal in which corporate 'McWorld' was put on trial – it became the longest legal hearing in English history.

McDonald's spent an estimated £10 million as against a defence total of £35,000 raised from public donations. Despite the denial of Legal Aid and a jury trial, some damning major findings were made against the company's core business practices.

In 1997 it was ruled that: McDonald's marketing has "pretended to a positive nutritional benefit which their food did not match"; that they "exploit children" with their advertising strategy; are "culpably responsible for animal cruelty"; and "pay low wages, helping to depress wages in the catering trade." The Appeal judges in 1999 added that it was fair comment to say that McDonald's employees worldwide "do badly in terms of pay and conditions", and true that "if one eats enough McDonald's food, one's diet may well become high in fat etc., with the very real risk of heart disease."

However the Courts ruled that we'd still libelled McDonald's over some points and outrageously ordered us to pay £40,000

damages to the \$35 billion company. We refused to pay a penny. Faced with increasing bad publicity, and mass defiance from campaigners, McDonald's capitulated by abandoning all efforts to get costs, damages or an injunction to stop the leafleting.

David Pannick, QC, writing in The Times, 20 April 1999 summed up the impact of the trial: "The McLibel case has achieved what many lawyers thought impossible; to lower further the reputation of our law of defamation in the minds of all right thinking people".

We've now made an application – awaiting a decision on admissibility – against the British Government at the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg. We're arguing that unfair and oppressive English defamation laws contravene the European Convention on Human Rights, in particular, Article 6 [right to a fair trial] and Article 10 [right to freedom of expression] of the Human Rights Convention, and that English libel laws are incompatible with the convention:

- multinational corporations, like governmental bodies, should have no right to sue for libel
- if there be a right to sue, it should be a defence to show 'reasonable belief' in the words complained of, or that the issues are of public importance.
- the case was an abuse of legal process – eg the imbalance of resources between the sides and the denial of a jury trial.

But from the beginning we'd had no illusions that the courts would defend the

public interest. The McLibel Support Campaign had succeeded in ensuring that the private and often seemingly obscure legal battle in the courtroom became a public issue fought and won in the court of public opinion and on the street. Leafletting, originally counted in thousands in the 1980s, mushroomed around the world – 3 million were handed out in the UK alone during the case. The pioneering 'McSpotlight' website, with over 85 million 'hits' in its first four years, enabled immediate world-wide access to a huge range of anti-McDonald's information, news and campaigning material. This victory over censorship demonstrates the power that ordinary people have when they believe in themselves and fight back against the powerful institutions who currently control our lives and the planet.

This was a real DIY victory, echoing other recent movements defying legal suppression – e.g. over issues of free speech, rights to organise and demonstrate, anti-Poll Tax, environmental and animal rights direct actions, occupations of empty homes and buildings, and workers' struggles. Social inequalities and controls, and conflict and environmental destruction are serious and growing problems, so public discontent and opposition is bound to increase – as will attempts to silence people. Rather than be intimidated by repression, we should see it as a sign of our success and be even more determined to fight back. We believe the best way to defend freedom of speech is to exercise it.

Paid-for editorial: the basest form of media corruption

John Rose on an insidious editorial practice

JOURNALISTS and public relations people have sunk their differences and joined forces in fighting an insidious and widespread publishing practice which is undermining press freedom – and the CPBF is supporting them.

The practice, introduced by publishers in an effort to circumvent their own self-regulatory Codes of Advertising and Sales Promotion, allow businesses to buy their way onto editorial pages, and replace copytasting with an entirely commercial process tied to charging for the publication of news releases.

Charges come in a variety of guises – as fees for typesetting, (most commonly) colour separations, pictorially supported editorial, as free space for advertisements placed or copies

of client's lists of suppliers (to be hounded for advertising), or charges for a visiting 'editorial team' – and now web authoring rates!

Experience and expertise in editorial departments is now needed less; these are being replaced by youngsters touting for cash from press release sources. PR concerns that do not pay the cash demanded will not, in most cases, see a release published. Some so-called editors rely for their incomes solely on commission earned from the sale of editorial space. Many journalists hate the system but are told they can leave their jobs if they don't like it. Job prospects and decent standards in both journalism and public relations are now on the slide. Editorial integrity and the idea of third-party endorsement are being lost. Readers' interests are bypassed in the rush for profits

and the concept of press freedom is disappearing in the dust left behind.

The Advertising Standards Authority and its mentor, the Committee on Advertising Practice, is determined not to intervene in a practice by which publishers convert, they say, news releases into instant advertising, ie creating advertising by the back door. All UK publishers were represented in drawing up the Advertising Codes as a piece of industry-wide self-regulation which makes a clear distinction between advertising and editorial, exempting all press and public relations material.

Combating this threat to press freedom is the National Council on Editorial Independence (NCEI), representing the CPBF, Chartered Institute of Journalists, National Union of Journalists, Society of Editors, Independent Registered Consultants Group and the British

Fluid Power Association. Editorial charges are condemned by the Institute of Public Relations, the Public Relations Consultants Association and the Incorporated Society of British Advertisers, while a growing list of NCEI supporters includes the International Building Press, the Motor Industry Public Affairs Association and the London Press Club.

To place a price on editorial exposure is the basest form of press corruption. That this should be brought about by publishers deliberately ignoring their own industry's self-regulatory codes compounds the corruption to such abysmal levels that it can only be viewed with disgust.

■ John Rose is the Chair of NCEI. For further information contact NCEI, The Old School, Dunwich, Suffolk IP17 3DU Tel/fax 01728 648570

Stella Rimington: is this all?

WHY did The Guardian promote so heavily its serialisation of Stella Rimington's autobiography? The Guardian Weekend magazine piece of 8 September, *I Spy*, written by Guardian journalist, Richard Norton-Taylor and editor Alan Rusbridger, trailing the serialisation which began the following Monday, milked the slender offerings for all they were worth.

'She tracked, trailed, bugged and burgled some of the most ruthless spies, drug-runners, subversives and terrorists of her generation – and who knows who else besides,' the intro trumpeted. Well yes, but the only problem is that the book says precious little about what she actually did.

In a roundabout way the journalists admit there isn't much in the way of revelations in the book – it's 'an inevitably selective and elliptical autobiography which describes much about her life without, perhaps, explaining much'. So why all the fuss about it? The paper's G2 supplement had its front page devoted to the book for two days promoting the extracts from the memoirs – and probably would have done so for a third day if the awful events in the USA hadn't occurred.

Richard Norton-Taylor, a respected and tireless reporter specialising in official secrecy for The Guardian, did also write a piece on day two of the serialisation (11

September), 'Truth, but not the whole truth' that points out some of the gaps in her account. In her memoirs she described how MI5 'infiltrated an experienced agent into CND's headquarters' because the group was exposed to Soviet influence or communist infiltration, and targeted 'subversives' like Harriet Harman and Patricia Hewitt as 'communist sympathisers'. He points out to target an individual must involve monitoring the activities and conversations of that person's colleagues and associates.

On the epic, year-long miners' strike she says, 'We in MI5 limited our investigations to those who were using the strike for subversive purposes.' As Richard Norton-Taylor comments, 'She carefully avoids the issue of whether MI5 had informants or agents among those it considered "subversive". Again, if MI5, was monitoring the activities of those it considered subversive, it was presumably monitoring the conversations of those they were talking to.'

His piece ends with a rather lame conclusion. 'Rimington may well have wanted to say more about these episodes, and others. Even if she had done so, in early drafts handed to MI5 and Whitehall for vetting, they would almost certainly be excised.'

Exactly. What The Guardian published were extracts from a safe, security-vetted piece of self-promotion.

Brass Eye and the ITC judgement

THE ITC has responded to the furore over the Chris Morris Brass Eye programme on paedophilia by dictating the apology that C4 must transmit on air. C4 executives are clearly unhappy about this intervention by the ITC (after pressure from government ministers). There are many issues here, both about the campaign of complaints whipped up at the time of the programme and also about government's role in the regulation of programme content in broadcasting.

The Observer (9.9.1) had an editorial that summed up our view admirably. It bears reprinting.

Tune in, Tessa

Ms Jowell, please engage your brain.

One of the most unappealing fixtures of British public life is the busybody brigade. They've had a field-day since the transmission of an episode of Brass Eye by Channel 4 in July. It was followed by an orchestrated complaints campaign. Now the Independent Television Commission and the Broadcasting Standards Commission have required the channel to broadcast an apology.

Channel 4 has nothing to apologise for. Brass Eye was transmitted late at night with

transparent warnings that its content might cause offence. As it happens, the programme itself was a clever, if uncomfortable, exploration of the ludicrous sexualisation of children and voyeuristic 'condemnation' of paedophilia that exists throughout our society nowadays. But opposition to this sort of heavy-handed interference should not be predicated only on high quality.

The ITC and the BSC, whose senior figures are all jockeying for position in a proposed new 'super-regulator' OFCOM, are not alone in having made themselves look ridiculous in a bid to impress with their toughness. Politicians, too, have been exposed as foolish by this sorry episode. Ministers David Blunkett, Beverley Hughes and Tessa Jowell all furiously condemned Brass Eye, some without having taken the elementary precaution of watching and listening to it first. Her arrogant reaction has, in particular, seriously dented Ms Jowell's credibility as Culture and Media Secretary only weeks after she took up her new job. We hope in future that she might consider engaging her brain before issuing inflammatory public denunciations.

ITN should get the contract

By GRANVILLE WILLIAMS

THERE'S a sense of anxiety at ITN as the ITV Council discusses the bids submitted by ITN and its rival, Channel Three News, for the national ITV news contract. The reason for this is the publication of a report by Indepen Consulting that backed the Channel Three bid, saying 'increased competition would better ensure the plurality of news to the nation'.

Others also share this view. In the last issue of Free Press a former ITN producer, Bruce Whitehead, criticised 'the downmarket slide in the quality of its ITV bulletins' and argued 'perhaps it is time to give someone else the chance to improve the quality of ITV news, in the interests of competition and diversity'.

Up until now most people in the industry have been sceptical about the chances of success for the Channel Three bid, and there has been little serious scrutiny of the consortium's composition, or the impact that a successful bid would have. One fact is striking. The consortium isn't just a plucky little group of media entrepreneurs. Its five shareholders, each with a 20% stake, include Sky (37.5% owned by News Corporation and a major global media group), the US financial news agency, Bloomberg, and CBS, owned by the giant American media conglomerate Viacom. CanWest, another powerful North American media company, has a 29.9% stake in Ulster TV. The fifth member, Chrysalis, is an independent production company and British-owned.

In effect if Channel Three won the contract it would represent a major incursion by global media giants into UK broadcasting, whereas ITN's shareholders (Carlton, Daily Mail and General Trust, Granada, Reuters and United Business Media) are comparative minnows in the global media pool.

Another particular concern is the role of Sky News which has led the bid and put together the consortium. Sky News unsuccessfully bid against ITN for the Channel 4 contract (£17m per annum) in 1997 and the Channel 5 contract (£7m per annum) in 1999. Sky News itself costs around £35m per annum and has failed to break even in any year since its launch in 1989. That's one reason why Rupert Murdoch would like to get his hands on the ITV news contract, but it would raise serious concerns about media diversity. His

group already controls the dominant digital TV platform in the UK and a large chunk of what was Fleet Street. Encroaching into free-to-air TV news is a step too far.

News is an expensive business and there has to be some relationship between the quality and range of the news service provided and the value of the news contract. ITN has had to cope, not without pain and staff-cuts, with a steady fall in the value of the news contract from £80m in 1991 to £45m in 1997. In this round ITN is bidding around £36m, whereas Sky is suggesting figures of between £20-25m to provide a 'cost-effective' news service.

One of the curious illogicalities in the Indepen report, co-authored by Phillipa Marks, a former adviser to the Department of Media, Culture and Sport, is that, whilst she identifies the dominance of the viewing audience for news on BBC (32%) and ITV (22%) compared with the 0.3% Sky News attracts, she asserts this is because 'audiences have been conservative in their actual news viewing, showing a marked reluctance to move from the main terrestrial TV bulletins'. Another conclusion could be that audiences are broadly satisfied with the BBC and ITV news and are exercising freedom of choice and preference, rather than being 'conservative'.

Another of the report's conclusions is problematic. Even if Channel Three were to win the contract from ITN it argues that 'ITN would continue to have a higher market share of news than Sky, Bloomberg or any other member of the Channel Three consortium'. This avoids mentioning what would be one of the consequences for ITN – the main ITV contract underpins the other activity of ITN, and to lose it would inevitably endanger the other ITN services. An emasculated ITN would leave the field open for further expansion by its competitors.

A decision by the ITV council in favour of Channel Three will have other drastic ramifications. The BBC News operation, much expanded during the 1990s, is the brand leader with resources around £200m but ITN, with resources across its different contracts and business, of £100m has provided healthy competition. It was precisely because the BBC was failing badly against ITN that it strengthened its news service, but what would happen if the competition diminished?

'Diversity' and 'plurality' have been deployed by both contenders to justify their bids for the news contract, but it is very difficult to see how a decision to award the contract to Channel Three will enhance either of these. It could weaken, perhaps irretrievably, ITN as a strong news voice, but it is unlikely to have any impact on the deep pockets and resources of the global media groups behind the Channel Three bid.

The decision is expected in early October.



Questions about OFCOM

By JULIAN PETLEY

THERE'S a plumb job in the media coming up quite soon: chief executive of the Office of Communications (Ofcom), the new 'super-regulator' which will bring together the Broadcasting Standards Commission, the Independent Television Commission, the Radiocommunications Agency, the Radio Authority and Ofiel. One of the prime candidates for that job is Patricia Hodgson, chief executive of the ITC. This is, of course, the organisation that, in July, so displeased the new Culture Secretary, Tessa Jowell,

No doubt Ms Hodgson put aside all thoughts of her future job prospects when helping the ITC to reach a decision on how it should react to the complaints which it received about the programme. Nonetheless the spectacle of a cabinet minister openly leaning on a broadcasting regulator not only has uncomfortable parallels with Home Secretary Leon Brittan's public pressuring of the BBC Governors over Real Lives in 1987, but it also crystallises serious doubts about whether it is wise to invest so much regulatory power in a single body, especially one which is so close to government.

Of course, the White Paper in which Ofcom was first announced in December 2000 did its best to dispel fears about possible government interference in its business, reassuring us that 'the regulator will be independent, will act at arm's length from the government but still work closely with the DTI, DCMS and other relevant departments'. However, what such bromides really come down to in practice is nothing other than a continuation of the broadcasters' habitual state of 'liberty on parole' – in other words, 'free' as long as they don't do something which seriously annoys the government (or the Daily Mail and News of the World, which in this instance amounts to the same thing), in which case the sky very publicly falls in. Thus the nannying functions of the

Broadcasting Standards Council will live on in Ofcom, one of whose tasks will be 'protecting the interests of citizens by maintaining accepted community standards in content, balancing freedom of speech against the need to protect against potentially offensive or harmful material'.

The lesson of the looming Ofcom, as well as the Brass Eye controversy, is simply this: that for all the White Paper's rhetoric about 'promoting open and competitive markets' in broadcasting and 'ensuring universal access to a choice of diverse services', the government regards actual broadcasting content as far too important to be regulated by viewers themselves, or by the market forces in which it otherwise displays such touching faith.

Of course, looking at the state of what passes for journalism in much of the 'self-regulated' British press, one may feel that they're entirely right to be cautious in this matter. This, however, simply raises the question of why the press, and particularly the Press Complaints Commission, has been conspicuously left out of Ofcom altogether. After all the whole logic of the White Paper is quite clearly that a 'converged' media requires converged regulation. But is not the press as deeply involved as any other medium in this process of convergence?

Perish the thought that the government is terrified of alienating its fair-weather friend, Rupert Murdoch. But could this also be the reason why the government has conspicuously failed to bring forward the much-needed Bill on cross-media ownership that seemed to be clearly foreshadowed in the White Paper?

And could this, too, explain the shameful contrast between the silence with which the government at first greeted the News of the World's 'name and shame' pantomime and the unseemly haste with which it condemned Chris Morris' devastating satire on the kind of populist journalism that reached its absolute nadir in that campaign?

CPBF
NEWS

LABOUR CONFERENCE FRINGE MEETINGS

Monday 1 October 12.45 pm

**'The Communications
Revolution – Who Benefits?'**
**Queens Hotel, 1-5 Kings Street,
Brighton**

Speakers: Tony Lennon, President Bectu, Roy Greenslade, Journalist, Christine Kent, Public Voice and Phillip Whitehead MEP. Chair Julian Petley CPBF.

Wednesday 3 October 5.45 pm

'Open up the secret state'
**Sussex Arts Club 7 Ship Street,
Brighton (a few minutes from
the conference centre)**

Speakers: David Shayler; Duncan Campbell, Journalist; Nigel Wylde, (Chair ROSA – the Campaign to Repeal the Official Secrets Act) Chair Annie Machon.

Communications Bill public meeting

THE NUJ is joining forces with the Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom and the broadcasting workers' union BECTU in organising a series of campaigning meetings around the country on the forthcoming Communications Bill. The meetings are entitled: 'The communications revolution – who benefits?' They will discuss how media workers, community and cultural organisations and interested members of the public are organising to change the bill.

Manchester Saturday 13 October 11am-1pm (10.30am refreshments) Cinema 2, Cornerhouse, 70 Oxford Street Manchester M1 5NH. Speakers: Granville Williams CPBF, Andy Walsh (Independent Manchester United Supporters Association) Dave Toomer (past President NUJ) plus (invited) Alice Mahon MP and Tony Wilson (former FOC at Granada).

Admission by ticket (also obtainable on the day) or by ringing the box office on 0161 200 1500

Sheffield Wednesday 17 October

Organised by CPBF, Sheffield NUJ and the Community Media Association. 7pm-9pm (6.30 refreshments) National Centre for

Popular Music, 6 Paternoster Row, Sheffield S1 2QQ. Speakers: Granville Williams CPBF, Sylvia Harvey, Professor of Broadcasting Policy Sheffield Hallam University, Bob Franklin author of 'Newszak' and 'British Television Policy', Steve Buckley, Director, Community Media Association. Chair: Julia Armstrong, National Union of Journalists Sheffield Branch.

Preston Tuesday 30 October Organised by CPBF and the NUJ. 7pm-9pm Greenbank Lecture Theatre, University of Central Lancashire, Preston PR1 2HE. Speaker: Granville Williams CPBF. Chair: Chris Frost NUJ.

Bath NUJ Tuesday 30 October 6.30 pm Hatchetts public house, Queen Street, Bath. Speaker Tom O'Malley author 'The Communications Revolution – Who Benefits?'

**Nottingham CPBF/Public
Voice/NUJ/Bectu** meeting 12 November 7.30 pm Peacock Hotel, Nottingham. Further details to be announced.

More meetings are planned in Glasgow, Cardiff, Newcastle and Belfast. Watch this space!

Free Press is edited by Granville Williams for the National Council

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FREE Press

SPECIAL ISSUE, October 2001

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Journal of the Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom

WE WENT to press as the US and the UK began air strikes in Afghanistan. Our concern is to ensure that accurate information and a range of views are presented in the media.

Our worry is that, as in other military conflicts (the Falklands, the Gulf war and the bombing of Serbia) we are often subjected to spin, disinformation and cheerleading from most sections of the press for military solutions to complex problems.

We will be putting material on our website www.cpbf.org.uk to present our views and those of other organisations. We also give details in this issue of the launch of Media Workers Against the War.

There are also a number of other US-based web sites that give a range of critical and alternative views, including: www.mediachannel.org, www.tompaine.com and www.salon.com.

Finally, we need to understand what are the reasons for this present crisis. Unholy

Wars: Afghanistan, America and International Terrorism by John K. Cooley (Pluto Press) provides part of the essential background.

He details how the repercussions of the United States training and equipping militant Islamic groups after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 have been devastating.

The book documents how a volatile cocktail of religion, drugs, cold war politics, oil and arms dealing have brought us to the present conflict.

THE MEDIA'S WAR

By RICHARD KEEBLE

IT'S A sobering thought that better evidence is required to prosecute a shoplifter than is needed to commence a world war. This was the wry comment of Anthony Scrivener QC after Tony Blair announced to parliament on 3 October the supposed "proof" of Osama bin Laden's responsibility for the atrocities in the United States. As the Daily Mail commented: "Circumstantial it undoubtedly is. A lawyer would have a field day picking holes in it." Only nine of the document's 70 points focused on the 11 September attacks and provided no evidence that directly linked the Saudi-born dissident to them.

Yet Fleet Street could not allow reason to divert it from standing shoulder to shoulder with battle hungry Blair. So editors over-indulged in Orwellian doublethink pronouncing that the dossier did, indeed, provide all the proof needed to justify military attacks on Afghanistan and the toppling of the Taliban. According to The Times, the evidence was "compelling". It thundered: "There is no further need for diplomacy or room for negotiation: the choice, as the Prime Minister said, is to defeat the terrorists or be defeated. Action is therefore imminent." The Daily Mail, carried away with Blairite adulation, described it as a "remarkable dossier" that "was never intended to be picked over by lawyers."

For the "liberals" of the Guardian, fresh



from their rabid support for the Nato bombing of Serbia during the 1999 Kosovo conflict, "it is simply perverse to pretend that anyone other than bin Laden and his group is responsible". And no independent line was forthcoming from the Independent. The dossier, it claimed, was "more than enough to justify action against al-Qa'ida".

The Express was worried about the inadequacy of the evidence against the "prime suspect". But it continued: "We have to accept on trust that the vital piece of the jigsaw pointing to Bin Laden's guilt is in place." No such doubts worried the hyper-hawks at the Daily Telegraph. "Even if there had been no evidence at all to link bin Laden with the terrorist attack of September 11 – even if those attacks had not happened – the United States would be wholly justified in tracking him down and killing him," it commented chillingly.

This Fleet Street propaganda offensive on the "dubious dossier" – just days before the US led attacks on Afghanistan began – was all too predictable given editors' reactions to recent international crises. Instead of calling for restraint and working for a reduction in tensions, Fleet Street has too often backed bombing. Following the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in August 1990, editors immediately went on a war footing calling for "surgical" strikes to take out the new-

→ continued back page

Spreading disinformation

By **STEPHEN DORRIL**

WHEN journalists write about intelligence matters and reach for a cliché, inevitably it is that intelligence is 'a wilderness of mirrors'. Rarely used is James Angleton's other dictum that 'disinformation might be the chief job of an intelligence agency'. The latter is a more accurate statement of what has been appearing in the media since the events of 11 September.

Most journalists appear to confuse 'information' with 'intelligence' when they are two separate concepts. The truth is, they are very different. Agencies collect information that is collated, processed, analysed and then, more often than, spun into intelligence. Raw, unmediated intelligence is rarely available to the media, though it is worth recalling that during the Cuban Missile Crisis the Kennedy administration did release ultra-secret U-2 high-altitude surveillance photographs of the Soviet missile sites on Cuba to the United Nations and then the press.

In the last few weeks we have been liberally dosed with hasty, unverifiable and often contradictory intelligence (Osama Bin Laden is worth \$400m: he is broke; he is a friend of Algeria and Iraq; he hates Algerians and Iraqis), little of which can be regarded as reliable. The working practices of investigative journalists on the Washington Post of All the President's Men era, when no fact was published without three separate sources to verify it, seems a distant dream.

Ministers, who are often entranced by the magic word 'secrecy', hide behind the phrase 'intelligence sources and methods' to curtail debate and scrutiny. The reality is that sources can be obscured and blacked-out in documents, while methods have not really changed, except for technical details, in decades. Bugs are planted, telephones, fax machines, mobile phones, web sites, internet communications are tapped. All this is common knowledge.

Bin Laden knows this all too well, which is why some reports claim that he never uses these forms of communication. Which, of course, makes his alleged telephone call to his mother just before 11 September, all the more intriguing. Did he make it? His step-father naturally rebuts the claim but adds: 'Osama has not used a telephone since he discovered that his conversations were being monitored by the United States.' (Sunday Times, 7 October.)

The point here is, why not release the original tape of the conversation? Did he use the phrase 'massive events'? Is it a correct translation? Robert Fisk, whose sceptical reporting has been a beacon of good journalistic practice, has noted (The Independent, 29 September) previous 'serious textual errors'

made by CIA translators.

The British government's 21-page document laying out the case for Bin Laden's orchestration of the events of 11 September is not particularly impressive. In fact, it is at best flimsy, with little new material of any substance. Chris Blackhurst (Independent on Sunday, 7 October) called it 'a report of conjecture, supposition and unsubstantiated assertions of fact', which is about right. Clearly, the Americans thought the same because the CIA decided two days later to 'leak' further information in an attempt to shore up the case. Bin Laden may indeed be guilty of the crime but we have, as yet, seen little evidence to prove it.

In 1951 Prime Minister Clement Attlee was warned of intelligence fears that Russian agents had suitcases with kits to construct an atomic bomb. Attlee was not unduly concerned. The same scenario appeared in the early seventies. Then it was Soviet special forces. It surfaced again in the mid-nineties, when stories appeared about weapons-grade plutonium disappearing from Soviet states.

Intelligence agencies continually create alarmist disinformation. Who now recalls 'Red Mercury' the mysterious substance that was a source of cheap nuclear weapons for terrorists; the 'white-coated mercenaries', the demobbed Soviet scientists selling their knowledge of weapons of mass destruction to Libya and Iraq; the nuclear artillery shells which went missing from Soviet southern states; the 'Islamic bomb' which terrorists were building to be in use by 1995; and the cheap and easily assembled 'dirty bomb'.

Since 11 September the intelligence agencies with the aid of gullible journalists, editors desperate for endless copy and politicians on a crusade have constructed a truly global conspiracy theory. At the top is the mastermind from every Ian Fleming fantasy, Osama Bin Laden, who has a 'golden domino' theory of regional domination in the Middle East, controlling a vast network, Al-Qaeda, of thousands of terrorists across the globe, now asleep but with access to millions of dollars, and all awaiting the call to murder us in our beds.

Al-Qaeda, according to the press, has so far attempted to buy uranium from the Russian mafia; attempted to manufacture chemical and biological weapons, including anthrax and the plague; planned attacks on European gas and oil pipelines; plotted to blow up the US embassy in Paris; planned to kill President Bush at the G8 summit at Genoa; made a huge profit from share dealing immediately prior to the attack in America; plotted a Belgium attack; and is planning another thirty attacks against the West in London, Washington,

European capitals and the Vatican.

If James Angleton was alive he might have added a third quote: The function of an intelligence agency is to create fear. Occasionally, of course, they get their analysis absolutely right.

In 1993 British intelligence put together a paper, 'Islamic Fundamentalism in the Middle East'. It noted that it thrived on the failure to resolve economic and social problems, corruption in government and the bankruptcy of political ideologies of all kinds. The report said that 'fundamentalist groups advocating violence and revolution are in a minority. Nevertheless ... Western, particularly American, culture and materialism are seen as a threat to Islamic values [but] fundamentalism does not present a coherent and monolithic threat to Western interests in the way that Communism once did. It is not supported by a superpower. Its appeal in Western countries is confined to Muslim minorities and the threat of subversion is, in the UK at least, minimal. Dealings with extreme fundamentalist regimes would be highly unpredictable but not necessarily unmanageable.'

The essential message was that the West had to deal with the underlying problems rather than fundamentalism itself. Unfortunately, the message was not heeded and it continues to get lost in the mix of poor intelligence, political spin and disinformation that proves to be so attractive to the media. Stephen Dorril is the author of *MI6: Fifty Years of Special Operations*

LAPDOGS OR WATCHDOGS?

USA

THERE are two concerns about how US media may curb or silence independent and critical reporting.

The first is the role of the Federal Communications Commission – appointed by the President – that controls who gets a broadcast licence and clears the mergers that pump up the size of US media conglomerates. Sam Hussein has a piece, *The FCC, the Media and War*, on www.tompaine.com where he points out that Daniel Ellsberg, who worked on the Pentagon Papers (a devastating internal study on the Vietnam War), risked everything by leaking the Papers to various media outlets. The TV networks wouldn't touch them because they knew it might spark a costly investigation by the FCC and jeopardise their licences.

The New York Times published much of the Pentagon Papers but the Nixon administration got the courts to issue a restraining order, so Ellsberg leaked parts of the Papers to *The Washington Post*. The Post, unlike the Times, had substantial broadcast holdings and was vulnerable to the FCC. The paper's lawyers thought publication would endanger its broadcast licences. The paper only published articles about the Papers, not extended extracts.

Hussein points out the current FCC head is Michael Powell, the son of Colin Powell, Chair of the Joint Chiefs during the Gulf War, when there were unprecedented restrictions on press coverage from the field.

The second issue is the close links between

Big Oil, government and media companies. At the pinnacle is the President himself, whose connection with oil interests is well known. Before taking her position as National Security Affairs Adviser Condoleezza Rice was a director of Chevron. On the board of directors of General Electric/NBC is Texaco director (and former US Senator) Sam Nunn. Another Texaco director, Charles Price II, sits on the New York Times/Boston Globe board of directors and a third member of Texaco's board, William Steere Jr, sits on the board of directors of Dow Jones/Wall Street Journal.

Before he became Secretary of State, Colin Powell was a member of the board of America Online, prior to its merger with CNN's parent company, Time Warner. Now a member of the Chevron board of directors, Carla Hills, also sits on the board of AOL Time Warner, the world's biggest media conglomerate.

■ Bill Maher has been savagely attacked for his comments on the US talk-show, *Politically Incorrect*: "We have been the cowards lobbing cruise missiles from 2,000 miles away. That's cowardly. Staying in the airplane when it hits the building – say what you like about it, it's not cowardly."

Fedex and Sears pulled all sponsorship from the show. John Patterson commented in *The Guardian* (5 October): "The show ... acts as a reminder of the perils of one country marching in ideological lockstep towards a conflict half of its people can't be bothered to educate themselves about."

MEDIA WORKERS WHO WANT TO STOP THE WARMONGERING

TIM GOPSILL ON THE AIMS OF

MEDIA WORKERS AGAINST THE WAR

WITH the build-up to a global conflict, activists have revived Media Workers Against the War – MWW. This grouping of journalists and others has set itself the following aims:

- "We are workers in the media opposed to the current war drive and the plans for a US-led military assault on Afghanistan and possibly other countries.
- "We are utterly opposed to all acts of terror against civilian populations, whether committed by governments or groups of individuals.
- "We believe that in the current crisis it is more important than ever to protect and promote pluralism in debate, the free flow of information, and the public scrutiny of official pronouncements.
- "We therefore resolve to join together as

Media Workers Against the War in order to:

1. Participate in the broad movement now rapidly emerging against the war
2. Collate and disseminate facts and arguments pertinent to the war, not only from Britain but from around the world
3. Promote anti-war viewpoints through the media and expose and resist attempts at censorship and disinformation
4. Oppose media coverage that in any way licenses or gives succour to racism or attacks on asylum seekers."

MWW first emerged at the start of the Gulf War in 1991, when it campaigned inside and outside the media industry for fairer, more balanced reporting. It resumed its activity in 1999 with the bombing of Yugoslavia, and now with the threat of wider conflict, it has been revived again.

Following two well-attended planning meetings in London, it has moved quickly to

set up a website and is planning to derive a printed bulletin from the material. The site carries news, a discussion forum (in which all views, including those in favour of the war, are welcome), and an archive drawn from a team monitoring exercise.

The group emphasises that it is interested not just in bad, unbalanced or dangerous reporting or commentary: it recognises there has been much very good journalism, which it will promote. A lot of the material comes from overseas, particularly the USA.

MWW is leafleting media houses and holding workplace meetings. On October 10 it staged a big public meeting in London addressed by Paul Foot, John Pilger, Rosie Boycott and the National Union of Journalists General Secretary, John Foster. Regional meetings are planned. For information on all aspects of the campaign, go to the website: www.mww.org

UK

'How Can the US bomb this tragic people?'

Robert Fisk, *Independent on Sunday*, 23 September

I WAS working for *The Times* in 1980, and just south of Kabul I picked up a very disturbing story. A group of religious mujahedin fighters had attacked a school because the communist regime had forced girls to be educated alongside boys. So they had bombed the school, murdered the head teacher's wife and cut off her husband's head. It was all true.

But when *The Times* ran the story, the Foreign Office complained to the foreign desk that my report gave support to the Russians. Of course. Because the Afghan fighters were the good guys. Because Osama bin Laden was a good guy. Charles Douglas-Home, then editor of *The Times*, would insist that Afghan guerrillas were called 'freedom fighters' in the headline. There was nothing you couldn't do with words.

And so it is today. President Bush now threatened the obscurantist, ignorant, super-conservative Taliban with the same punishment as he intends to mete out to bin Laden. Bush originally talked about 'justice and punishment' and about 'bringing to justice' the perpetrators of the atrocities. But he's not sending policemen to the Middle East; he's sending B-52s. And F-16s and AWACS planes and Apache helicopters. We are not going to arrest bin Laden. We are going to destroy him. And that's fine if he's the guilty man. But B-52s don't discriminate between men wearing turbans, or between men and women or women and children.

I wrote last week about the culture of censorship which is now to smother us, and of the personal attacks which any journalist questioning the roots of this crisis endures. Last week, in a national European newspaper, I got a new and revealing example of what this means.

I was accused of being anti-American and then informed that anti-Americanism was akin to anti-Semitism. You get the point, of course. I'm not really sure what anti-Americanism is. But criticising the United States is now to be the moral equivalent of Jew-hating. It's OK to write headlines about 'Islamic terror' or my favourite French example 'God's madmen', but it's definitely out of bounds to ask why the United States is loathed by so many Arab Muslims in the middle East. We can give the murderers a Muslim identity: we can finger the Middle East for the crime – but we may not suggest any reasons for the crime.

THE MEDIA'S WAR

→ from front page

found monster, Saddam Hussein. And later during the Desert Storm campaign, when 200,000 Iraqi conscripts were estimated to have died, no newspaper spoke out against the massacres (though the Guardian was sceptical throughout).

The pro-war consensus emerged again during the Kosovo conflict of 1999. But once Nato's risk-free bombings from the skies began, Fleet Street's armchair strategists united in calling for a ground assault on Serbia. Not even the generals dared adopt this battle plan. Only one newspaper opposed the bombings, the Independent on Sunday, and its editor was removed days after the strikes were halted. Yet while the vast majority of Fleet Street columnists backed the Desert Storm massacres, dissent did surface during the Kosovo crisis and out of 99 columnists I surveyed 33 opposed the bombings.

The post-11 September crisis has again seen a lively debate amongst the columnists. Voices both for and against the military response to the US outrages were heard. Significantly most of Fleet Street's commentary on the press coverage highlighted this diversity. But the hum of controversy amongst the columnists was drowned by the din from the editorials which almost unanimously backed the military option – and by the news coverage which hyped the

inevitability of strikes.

Another crucial element of the propaganda war were the public opinion polls (as, for instance, in the Guardian, Observer and Telegraph) which helped in the manufacture of public consent for the military action. For none of the polls explored in any detail public views about peaceful, legal, diplomatic, humanitarian solutions to the crisis: Since the polls were based, like most of the news coverage, on the inevitability of military action, they served to create rather than reflect opinion.

Moreover, the Bush/Blair "war on terrorism", avidly promoted by Fleet Street, crucially ignored the state terrorism of the US and UK and their new-found "allies" such as Russia and Pakistan. And the hyper-personalising of the crisis, with all the focus on "terrorist warlord" Osama bin Laden, diverted attention from other destabilising factors such as the ever-expanding, global military industrial complex. Indeed, the totally disproportionate display of military might around war-ravaged, famine-stricken Afghanistan showed a military industrial complex frighteningly out-of control. The "restraint" of the US-led forces, heralded by Fleet Street before the strikes began, was a myth.

Richard Keeble, senior lecturer in journalism at City University, London, is author of *Secret state, silent press* (John Libbey)

MEETING

Challenges for the media in the aftermath of 11 September

Panel includes leading journalists covering the events

Organised by NUJ London Press & PR Branch

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