

SECRETS & LIES

Stephen Dorril analyses the disinformation campaign



AS THE countdown to the war against Iraq begins the psychological warfare warriors are busy laying the ground for a full-blown disinformation campaign in the British and American press. The maxim for any such campaign is that first impressions are all-important. No matter how strong the rebuttal with facts, the initial stories will stick in the public's mind. The first strike has been the use of British and American 'intelligence dossiers' which have been leaked to trusted journalists and newspapers. These contain damaging material on Iraq and evidence of Saddam Hussein's rebuilding of weapons of mass destruction which, according to Foreign Secretary Jack Straw, is 'overwhelming and compelling'. The main stories have been:

- 'Saddam has given shelter to hundreds of Al-Qaeda and Taliban fighters' (Telegraph, 9.3.02). This is part of a campaign to link Saddam to the Afghan war.

The message from Bush is clear: War against Saddam is inevitable

- The CIA has traced a series of 'contacts and linkages' between the Al-Qaeda terrorist network and Saddam (Financial Times, 20.3.02). The CIA has so far failed to link Saddam to September 11.
- 'Iraqi military intelligence officers are said to be assisting extreme Palestinian groups in terrorists attacks on Israel' (Telegraph, 9.3.02). Israel has been the source of a number of stories as it attempts to exploit the 'War on Terrorism'.
- 'Saddam's former arch-rival, Iran, is now helping to rearm him' (ditto). Attempt to create links between the others belonging to 'the Axis of Evil'.
- Saddam is continuing to develop chemical and biological weapons (MI6

dossier revealed by Straw, 10.2.02).

- Saddam is developing long-range missiles capable of striking Israel and the Gulf States (ditto).
- Saddam is trying to procure nuclear weapons technology (ditto).
- Saddam can quickly build a 'dirty bomb' from nuclear material (ditto).
- Saddam can build 'a crude nuclear bomb within five years' (ditto).
- Saddam is holding an American pilot from the Gulf War (MI6 told the CIA, leaked to the Washington Post, 11.3.02).
- Iraq has a secret underground network of laboratories for chemical and biological weapons (Iraqi defector revealing '3,000 word manuscript' to the Sunday Times and Telegraph, 17.3.02).
- Second defector revealed that 'milk trucks' had been converted to mobile laboratories (ditto).
- Iraq has converted '1,000 trucks' into missile launchers and other military vehicles to carry 155mm howitzers (Satellite photographs shown by the Americans to the UN, Guardian, 7.3.02).
- Eight Iraqis were expelled from Sweden for 'spying on British diplomats in preparation for suspected terrorist attacks'. This was 'the first sign that Saddam may have activated a European network of spies to retaliate if he is attacked' (Sunday Times, 17.3.02).

Many of these stories have a familiar ring to them. Most are replays of themes developed during the Gulf War. We were assured then - we were even shown the photographs as proof - that Saddam had converted trucks into Scud launchers. It was untrue. They actually turned out to be petrol tankers. We were told that Saddam could build a nuclear bomb 'within two months'.

The Vienna-based International Atomic Energy Agency stated in December 1998 that it never did find a blueprint for a nuclear bomb. There is no evidence that Iraq has the ability to manufacture a nuclear weapon or has been able to secure the necessary plutonium.

Some of these stories are undoubtedly true but not all. And even those that contain a truth may not be all they appear to be. There is a considerable difference between producing biological 'agents' and manufacturing a biological 'weapon'. There is no evidence that Iraq has ever had the ability to 'aerosolise' a weapon or create a 'fusing mechanism' for a missile.

Much of the material on weapons of mass destruction relies on the evidence of Iraqi defectors. They may well have information which is reliable, but they are nearly all tainted by their association with the US-backed Iraqi National Congress which, critics allege, 'goes on producing a series of defectors to tell the Americans what they want to hear'.

CIA chief accuses Iraq of having links with al-Qaeda

Good, detailed secret intelligence from Iraq is something the West, former CIA director James Woolsey told John Simpson, 'hasn't possessed since the 1980s'. Jack Straw has consistently argued that there was no link between Saddam and Al-Qaeda but this will not stop the intelligence agencies feeding the press the line that such a link exists - on the basis, as Simpson acknowledges, 'of that magical, uncheckable substance, secret intelligence'.

Fortunately, compared to the the Gulf War we do seem to enjoy a less gullible press this time around. A number of excellent reports have appeared (Guardian, 15.3.02 & Observer, 17.3.02) which have questioned the evidence emanating from fabrication factories such as the US Office of Strategic Influence and the briefings from New Labour flunkies attached to the Cabinet Office. But this is just the start, the real gems have yet to appear.

Stephen Dorril is the author of MI6: Fifty Years of Special Operations (Fourth Estate)

Why we need your money
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The war of minds

Ibrahim Nawar
Head of Arab Press Freedom Watch

A DANGEROUS world has resulted from 9.11. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Eastern bloc, western military forces have been looking for an "ENEMY" to fight against and justify corruption, military spending and social injustice. Right after the fall of the Berlin wall they created the war against Saddam Hussein. Then came the war in the Balkans, which kept western military forces busy for sometime. By enforcing a political solution to the Balkan crisis, the world took a deep breath and stretched itself, anticipating a period of relaxation. It was a dream that never came true.

9.11 came as the day some have been dreaming of, and perhaps planned for! Now there is an ideal "ENEMY" that can strike anywhere and at anytime. The enemy can be a passer-by in the street looking innocently at you, a passenger on a plane occupying the seat next to you, or someone who may one day send you a letter full of anthrax powder! The new "ENEMY" is not a state, and the war against it is neither traditional nor conventional. The name of new enemy is "TERRORISM". This is what right-wing politicians in the US and the EU and military generals everywhere want us to believe. The war against so-called "terrorism" has to be won first in the minds of the people.

There are plenty of weapons that can be used in the war of minds. The most important ones are: restrictions to freedom of expression, enforcement of emergency laws and manipulation of public opinion by using "black arts". In the USA and in Europe political institutions were under pressure to accommodate policies to legalise the use of weapons for the war of minds. Legislation was swiftly passed to impose the state of emergency. Newsroom editors came under fire when they handled news in a professional and liberal way, on the basis that such a way would endanger national security! False stories started to be flown around deliberately to manipulate public opinion. Stories linking anthrax letters to American scientists who came from Arab origin or claiming that Al-Qaeda members had acquired small nuclear weapons and would strike at US major cities have created fear and hatred, fear of the "OTHERS" and hatred towards them.

Creating a culture of fear was the main goal of the controversial Office of Strategic Influence, set up by the Pentagon to support the war against terrorism. Although the US administration had announced it was going to scrap the OSI, it appears from time to time that the "lie-making machine" is still alive. A story about Iraq using trucks as missile launchers would make anyone laugh, but such a story would benefit blood thirsty military generals who want to invade Iraq tomorrow. Iraq has once again become a target for war, although the ruined country is not at war with anyone. Instead of drawing the world's attention to the genocide against Palestinians, and the daily killings and atrocities by the Israeli occupation forces in the West Bank and Gaza strip, US military generals and right wing politicians are trying to divert international attention to Iraq.

Keeping public opinion from the real danger in the Middle East, the Israeli military occupation of the West Bank and Gaza strip, is a deliberate policy that can be seen through media reports coming out of Palestine. The fact that Palestinians are fighting a liberation war against occupying forces is widely ignored. Reports of Palestinians killed by Israelis are mostly put in the context that "a number have died in an exchange of fire between the two sides" or, and this is a preferable phrase to some journalists "The Israeli army opened fire in retaliation". When an Israeli is killed the story become headlines and in most cases is personalised.

Personalisation of a story is usually the way to gain sympathy and to win the hearts of the people and their minds. The way the Palestinian Intifada news is handled, does not only reflect ignorance and double standards, but also feeds into the policy of creating a culture of fear and hatred. It plays into the hands of the Israelis and feeds into a dangerous perception and belief identifying Europeans and Americans with Israel as fighting the same enemy (terrorism). A layperson would see Israel through media reports as a state at war against "Palestinian terrorists".

Globalization assumes we live in one big village. For some who believe they are the victorious power, this means they have the right to impose their culture on the minds of others, open markets for their goods, open skies for their planes and missiles, open seas for their destroyers and fighter

carriers, and have the flow of news moving one way only. Globalization cannot be that, as embarking on a road to achieving these goals can spread tensions, conflicts and perhaps wars everywhere.

The world can prosper through healthy and fair competition, and people can love each other on the basis of respect of culture, race and ethnic diversity. September 11 can be the everlasting tragic day if it is left to military generals and right-wing politicians to decide the fate of the world. Campaigning for freedom of expression is the best way to fight disinformation, black arts and the manipulation of public opinion. 9.11 should become the end of an unjust world, a world of deprivation and suffering for some and exploitation and tyranny for others. It should be the beginning of an era of peace, not war, a culture of inclusion not exclusion, and freedom for all.

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WITHOUT COMMENT

The war that 1,700 British troops are about to join is one of the least reported of modern times. We have absolutely no access to the enemy side. More worryingly, we do not have access to our own. US commanders routinely bar correspondents from the areas where the fighting is taking place and discourage contact with the Afghan commanders.

We do not know how many civilians have been killed in Afghanistan. We do not know how many have been detained or what has become of them. We do not know the casualty figures from mistakes in US targeting. Even less reported is the naval operation under way in the northern Arabian sea where the largest naval force since the second world war – more than 100 warships from a dozen countries – have been tracking hundreds of vessels a day, searching many in the hunt for Al-Qaeda and Taliban. As far as we know, they have found nothing.

Isabel Hilton, "The Taliban fish have swum away" *The Guardian* 21.3.02

Shayler to take fight to Europe

Barry White

PRESS reports following the five law lords decision on appeals heard in connection with the David Shayler case concentrated heavily on their dismissal of David's appeal. They unanimously dismissed the argument that the Official Secrets Act infringed his freedom of expression rights under the Human Rights Act. But they also appear to have left open the 'defence of necessity' which the prosecution claimed did not apply in this case. Representations made on behalf of the press and media were not dealt with by the Law Lords.

David Shayler had argued that his disclosure of information about MI5 to a newspaper was in the public interest and that the secrets act was incompatible with the Human Rights Act.

In a statement issued after the judgement David stated that those who attended the judgement clearly heard their Lordships reject the prosecution appeal and confirm the Appeal Court's ruling in his case. "This overturned the Official Secrets Act's absolute rule against disclosure by adding a defence of necessity. He continued: "I would remind everyone that since the government refused to take my evidence of intelligence service crimes, it has also increased the powers of the intelligence services under the RIP Act 2000 and the Terrorism Act 2000 and recent



terrorist legislation in response to the 'state of emergency' caused by 11 September."

The appeal by the media was also turned down. It challenged the blanket ban on disclosures by former agents. Lord Bingham of Cornhill, senior of the five Law Lords, in his written statement argued: 'The House received and heard interesting submissions on behalf of the Newspaper Society, nine newspapers and two television channels. But this appeal calls for decision of no issue directly affecting the media and I think it would be undesirable to attempt to give guidance in the context of this appeal.'

David will take his case to the European Court of Human Rights. The full trial is expected to begin on Monday 7 October.

WE NEED YOUR MONEY £20,000 appeal launched

Geoff Mason,
National Treasurer

At our National Council meeting in February we had a wide-ranging discussion about the future of the CPBF. Clearly there is unfinished business around the government's plans for Communications legislation that will take us up to 2003. There are other issues around press regulation and press freedom that we will continue to be active on.

Our discussion centred on what sort of an organisation we should attempt to develop after 2003. One idea was to move towards the model of the US pressure group, FAIR, which has developed an extremely effective action alert e-mail system that involves members and supporters in raising issues with media

organisations, politicians and journalists. Media Lens in the UK is also doing this very effectively.

We only started the discussion at the February National Council. It will continue up to, and be part of the business at our Annual General Meeting on Saturday 29 June.

The real problem is the cash we need to run the organisation. We will face an urgent problem from the summer of 2002, when funding for our work on the Communications legislation dries up. What we did agree to do at the February National Council is to make a determined effort to raise £20,000 to take us through to the end of 2003 and complete the work programme we have set ourselves.

We intend to raise £20,000 in three ways. Firstly, through a direct appeal to our

EDITORIAL

Media's vital role

In times of crisis journalists often reach for the cliché. 'The fog of war' is one doing the rounds now. However, the notion suggested by the phrase, of events shrouded in confusion, applies perfectly to two current situations: the deployment of 1,700 British troops in Afghanistan, and the deluge of disinformation around US military plans for Iraq.

In early March US troops began Operation Anaconda with the aim of crushing the Taliban and Al-Qaeda in eastern Afghanistan. Eight American soldiers were killed in fighting, seven after a Chinook helicopter crashed under fire. After two weeks the operation was deemed by the US military an 'unqualified and absolute success'.

Why UK troops are therefore required in exactly the same area is a puzzle.

The second issue is to do with the numerous examples of disinformation which have appeared in the media over links between Al-Qaeda and Saddam Hussein. Most recently a rift opened up between senior UK military officers and Tony Blair's spokesman, who suggested that the Baghdad regime was supplying Osama bin Laden's terrorists with chemical and biological weapons. Military sources have insisted that they have no evidence, intelligence or otherwise, that the Iraqi government or its agencies are passing on weapons of mass destruction to Al Qaeda.

The media's vital role should be to challenge the manipulation of facts and inaccurate briefings. Journalists should report accurately and present facts, not fiction. But we have a job to do as citizens. We also need to continuously question the news and the accuracy of opinion polls that say we support military action. We have to challenge rather than remain passive consumers, and in this context www.media-lens.org provides a good example of how this can be done.

individual members and supporters to give what you can, however small. Second, we are approaching all our trade union affiliates to ask them for donations. We are also going to make direct approaches to individuals and organisations that care about press freedom issues.

So, please do all you can to help us fund raise successfully. Help us to hit our target by sending your donation to the CPBF national office (details page 8).

Bloody Sunday

Patricia Holland on journalism, docudrama and the events of 30 January 1972



A FAMOUS image which became an iconic representation of Bloody Sunday, shows a distraught group of men struggling to carry a youth, 17-year-old Jackie Duddy, who is bleeding profusely from a gunshot wound. They are led by a priest, Father Edward Daly, head down to avoid the bullets, holding out a blood-stained handkerchief. On 30 January 1972, when a Northern Ireland civil rights march in Derry was fired on by British paratroopers killing 13 in less than 20 minutes, the death of this young man was already shockingly public.

Together with the other events it was recorded by photographers, film makers, journalists and activists, and has been repeatedly recalled over the next 30 years for television programmes, books, newspaper reports and an exhibition mounted by the Bloody Sunday Trust. Hundreds of witnesses observed the killings on that day, and millions have seen them at second hand. Even so the 1972 Widgery Inquiry refused to blame the paratroopers involved even though, in 1974, the UK Government officially accepted that the victims were innocent. The current Inquiry, conducted by Lord Saville has yet to challenge the Army version of events.

To mark the 30th anniversary, the short piece of film in which Father Daly and the tragic group move cautiously along Chamberlain Street, was recreated as part of two docudramas; *Bloody Sunday*, written and directed by Paul Greengrass for ITV and cinema release, and *Sunday*, written by Jimmy McGovern for Channel Four.

These two films give rise to a whole range

of questions - many of which have been chewed over in the press since they were shown on UK television in January. 'The truth about these terrible events is finally being allowed to be told' wrote David Granville, editor of *Irish Democrat* (Feb/March 2002). But the *Guardian's* leader (30 Jan) pointed out that both films 'leave questions unanswered'. In particular 'no truthful or adequate official account has been given why British paratroopers shot 27 unarmed Catholics in Derry on that day, killing 13 of them'.

In the view of Henry Patterson (TLS 8 Feb) Greengrass's version of over-reaction by soldiers as 'part of a working out of a local dialectic' was 'more plausible than McGovern's conspiracy theory'. McGovern himself is on record saying that, although he went into the project assuming that individual members of the parachute regiment were to blame, his three years of research changed his mind. 'I think the blame probably lies in Stormont and 10 Downing Street. An army that is not controlled by its political masters is no longer an army; it's a rabble. And the parachute regiment is no rabble'. A scene in his drama shows Edward Heath, Prime Minister at the time, reminding Lord Chief Justice Widgery, whose Inquiry is about to begin, that 'we are fighting a propaganda war'.

So can a drama offer explanations which conventional journalistic media find too difficult to express? Without doubt the emotional power of an event is rarely put across by a detached journalistic style, and drama can recreate the minutiae of human

interactions which can escalate into major events. For the Greengrass film the Paras were played by ex-soldiers who, in the word of producer Mark Redhead, 'quickly slipped into the old military routines, brewing up and moaning about the officers and getting wound up as the moment to go in approached'.

For Jimmy McGovern, the issue is one of class, of giving a space to those whose voices are not normally heard. In *Dockers* he had evolved a way of working together with some of the striking dock workers and their wives, who became co-authors of the drama. For *Sunday* he was invited to visit Derry by the Bloody Sunday Organising Committee, and together with members of the Committee formed Gaslight Productions to develop the project. The script came out of close contact with the families of those killed and personal discussions with the wounded and many other witnesses, including IRA members and British soldiers. As with *Dockers* and *Hillsborough* there is the sense that this drama is embedded in a community and it is their view we are getting. Greengrass's film is more distanced, using the masses of existing documentation as its source (in particular the accounts in Don Mullan's *Eye Witness Bloody Sunday*) rather than fresh interviews. It is less ready to accept conventional dividing lines - using the protestant civil rights activist and MP Ivan Cooper as its charismatic central figure. By contrast none of the leaders of the march have much of a role in the McGovern film.

The issues which a drama can highlight are not only those of truth, but also of understanding. Looking back over a period of time, the meaning and limits of commitment to a cause can be rethought, together with the issue of emotional and personal consequences of public events. The best sort of contemporary docudrama - and both of these films fall into that category - can move beyond simplification and myth making.

Yet there should be no question of dramatic techniques driving out conventional journalism on television. The structure of UK TV has allowed *Bloody Sunday* to be revisited repeatedly over the intervening years in many different formats. Peter Taylor, for whom *Bloody Sunday* was an early assignment for Thames Television's *This Week*, became the foremost expert on Northern Ireland issues on television, and has re-traced the events of that afternoon many times. Painsaking reporting of this sort has kept alive challenges to official cover-ups, such as those of the 1972 Widgery Inquiry, as well as making available to the public a developing view of the situation which is not confined to a single perspective. Such established current affairs programmes with regular reporting teams, have, tragically, all but disappeared, yet this type of outlet is an essential back-up for careful journalism underpinned by long-term research.

OWNERSHIP CONSULTATION

Jonathan Hardy surveys the responses

THE Government's consultation on media ownership has raised its crop of submissions. Only the non-confidential ones are available (www.culture.gov.uk/creative/media_owners/hip_replies.html) and there are notable absences such as Granada who do not deign to make their case publicly. There has been a well-organised lobby to overturn the prohibition on religious bodies owning licences - a change we oppose (www.cpb.org.uk). So with 64 submissions religious organisations dominate, followed by media organisations and trade bodies (24), NGOs (12), regulators (4), trade unions (4) and others (6).

From the sample I've read three main positions are clear. There are those who favour maximum deregulation, replacing regulations drawn up for individual media sectors with ordinary competition law, there are those who oppose this, and there are some, largely tactical, intermediary positions emerging. Dominant amongst the latter is the Scottish Media Group (SMG), whose proposals have already found favour with Government, according to *The Times* media correspondent Ray Snoddy.

SMG's proposals have their origins in the efforts of media companies in the mid 1990s to replace ownership rules with 'share of voice' measures which usually indicated plenty of room for further consolidation and cross-media ownership. The British Media Industry Group, a consortium of newspaper publishers, was the most notable proponent,

but proposals foundered on the difficulty of measuring influence across different media and setting an appropriate media 'exchange rate'. We argue instead that limits on ownership and cross-ownership should continue to be set within and across each market sector.

The SMG argues that revenue is a adequate proxy for media power and proposes that any company should be able to own up to 30 per cent of a single media market but no more than 25 per cent of total media revenue. In addition, SMG proposes that certain media be designated 'prime media assets', with companies allowed to own a maximum of five such assets. The SMG proposals would allow considerably greater concentration and cross-media ownership, which, of course, is their intention. The calculations of relevant markets include the BBC, a device which serves both to reduce the commercial sector's market share and to discount the specific obligations and safeguards shaping public service media. Only television, radio and print media are included, so multimedia integration is also largely ignored. Above all, the market calculations take no account of the social, political and cultural considerations that underpin the concept of media pluralism.

SMG's is the most brass-necked offering given the company's dominance of media in Scotland. SMG owns Scottish Television and Grampian TV, dominating channel three in Scotland. Through Caledonian Publishing, it owns *The Herald* and *Evening Times* as well as a host of magazines and it owns the principal

commercial radio operator in Scotland, Scottish Radio Holdings. Other acquisitions include Ginger Media Group (including Virgin Radio) and Scottish Premier League club Heart of Midlothian. By its own calculations of total market share, SMG has 2% of the market. So plenty of room for expansion within and beyond Scotland!

Several submissions trot out the now familiar refrain that the market will deliver pluralism and so there is no need for special regulation to prevent media concentration. The ITC develops the views expressed in the Consultation paper that pluralism concerns can be restricted to news and current affairs and that therefore all other media ownership rules can be liberalised. It calls for 'access regulation' but fails to address the implications of Sky's increasing platform dominance of digital television. Channel 4, by contrast, calls on the Government to regulate ownership of carriage (platforms) as well as content and require them to be separately owned.

But the challenge here is also to counter the way in which pluralism is being recast so that it may be 'secured' by safeguarding (some) news and current affairs output. As our lives become ever more mediated by the content and services of multimedia companies, it is vital that concentrated media power is tackled in all its evolving forms and that plurality (in ideas and imagery as well as opinion) and cultural diversity are fostered, even if never guaranteed, by effective ownership regulation.

A Voice for Scotland

David Eyre

SCOTLAND'S Gaelic community is pushing for a dedicated television channel for the language.

In the Communications white paper, the government promised it would consider the move, which was recommended by a Scottish Executive-appointed Gaelic Television Task Force and has received the backing of the Scottish Parliament's culture committee.

The call for a dedicated channel reflects increasing dissatisfaction with the present set up of Gaelic broadcasting.

Since 1991 Gaelic programmes have received state funding through the Gaelic Broadcasting Committee.

The committee receives £8.5 million a year from the Scottish Executive. That amount has not increased since the committee was established and in real terms has fallen year on year. If it had kept up with inflation, the fund would now be worth £11.5 million.

As a result the number of hours of Gaelic television broadcast in Scotland has fallen.

There have also been complaints that Gaelic programmes on independent television have been consigned to graveyard slots late at night.

The creation of a single channel under a new Gaelic Broadcasting Authority would offer the opportunity to create a financial structure more like that in Wales, where the Welsh-language channel S4C benefits from automatic increases linked to inflation.

No OFCOM regional seats

THE OFCOM legislation has now completed its passage through Parliament. However proposals that its governing body should have separate seats and advisory committees for Scotland and Wales were rejected. Broadcasting minister Kim Howells made it clear in the debate that while the regions would be consulted, responsibility for broadcasting would remain in Westminster.

OFCOM should be up and running by next

year when the communications bill is due to become law. But when the bill is published at the end of April, any proposals that threaten regional programming and cultural identity will encounter stiff rearguard action from the CPBF campaign.

The CPBF and the NUJ are pressing the Welsh Assembly to hold its own hearings on the bill. In May the CPBF and NUJ plan to brief Northern Ireland MPs at Stormont and to hold a public meeting in Belfast on the Communications Bill. The Education, Culture and Sport Committee of the Scottish Parliament will also be lobbied. The committee recently backed a call for funding for a single dedicated Gaelic-language channel under the control of a new Gaelic Broadcasting Authority.

USEFUL LINKS:

The Gaelic Broadcasting Committee www.ccg.org.uk
Gaelic Broadcasting Task Force Report, www.scotland.gov.uk/library3/heritage/gbtf-00.asp

A safety net for proprietors...

The Press Complaints Commission 1991-2001

Tom O'Malley

THE Press Complaints Commission (PCC) was set up in 1991. Funded by newspaper proprietors, it was chaired from 1991-1994 by Lord McGregor and from 1995-2002 by Lord John Wakeham, the former Tory Cabinet Minister. Wakeham's involvement with the collapsed US energy giant, Enron, led to him announcing in March 2002 that he would resign his £155,000 per year job as Chair of the PCC. This along with the publication of an officially sanctioned history of the PCC by the retired political historian, Richard Shannon, prompts the question, 'What has the PCC achieved?'

For the proprietors it has been a resounding success. Between 1983 and 1995 a wave of private member's bills (many written by the CPBF), government and parliamentary inquiries, led to the downfall of the Press Council (1953-90) and the real possibility that some form of statutory system for implementing citizen's rights in relation to press inaccuracies and intrusions might take shape. Since then, through the assiduous lobbying of top civil servants and politicians, and deft public relations, the PCC has seen off these threats.

But all this success does not detract from other stark facts. The PCC did not stop breaches of the Code it was there to police. Scandals continued, including payments to witnesses in the West murder trials and payments for the story of the convicted fraudster Nick Leeson.

When in 1996 the tabloids indulged in a flurry of racist coverage during the European football competition and later when the News of the World started to 'name and shame' allegedly convicted child abusers, the PCC did not adjudicate on the

complaints it received. There were repeated breaches of the Code, and brief bouts, as in 1997 after the death of Diana, Princess of Wales, of swift, high profile redrafts.

Yet in 1995 Wakeham asserted that 'Ordinary people do believe that we are working better than ever before' and that the PCC was a 'logistical and political triumph'. Shannon however admits that 'by the very nature of its procedures the PCC practically guarantees a predominant quantity of customer dissatisfaction'. Its record on adjudications held, and upheld is appalling. From 1991-1993, of 3,490 cases, 244 were adjudicated and only 104 upheld; in 2000 of 2,233 complaints 57 were adjudicated, and just 24 upheld. The vast majority of complaints never got past the starting post.

Neither the PCC nor Shannon provide a detailed explanation the process that leads to this level of rejection. Nor does Shannon dwell on the obvious fact that the PCC has no power to enforce its rulings. When the PCC did strongly criticise Piers Morgan, the editor of the Daily Mirror for his part in a share tipping scandal, nothing happened to him. He stayed in post.

The real success of the PCC is to network between civil servants, owners and politicians. Wakeham worked with key figures from the political world on the PCC, including Derry Irvine, Baroness Smith, the widow of ex-Labour leader John Smith, and one of Thatcher's top, retired civil servants, Sir Brian Cubbon. In the 1990s David English, a key industry figure, acted as 'the industry man in the corridors of power' who helped influence Labour thinking on regulation via his 'rapport' with the revisionist Labour media spokesperson Mo Mowlam. Blair's deal with Rupert

Murdoch in 1995, in which he signalled his intention of not acting against Murdoch's interests, provided a favourable climate for all this influence mongering which, led to a famous PCC victory over the Human Rights legislation.

Wakeham managed to get Blair and Home Secretary, Jack Straw, to sideline the Lord Chancellor, Derry Irvine, and water down the protections on privacy in the European Convention on Human Rights, when that was embodied in the Human Rights Act. The government accepted a PCC inspired amendment to protect self-regulation. Shannon points out that Wakeham is 'reputed' to have drafted words for Straw to use in committee stage of the bill.

Lurking behind the urbane Wakeham were the dogs of scandal ready to be unleashed on any politician who stepped out of line. A reading of Shannon reinforces the reasonable supposition that David Mellor, the Secretary of State involved in media regulation in 1992 was, in part, exposed over an extra-marital affair, because of his willingness to countenance criticisms of self regulation.

The book is a fitting testimony to the way elite power networks operate in the UK, conserving the power of the powerful behind a smokescreen of high profile self-pleading and public relations. It devotes very little attention to the procedures of the PCC, to any detailed assessment of its effectiveness, or to the nature of the 'ordinary' complaints it receives. In this it is a true reflection of the PCC, for whom the vast majority of complainants are not deemed worthy of a hearing. Photograph a privileged Prince at a nasty public school like Eton, and the PCC comes running. Complain about racist coverage of football and the very same organisation throws its hands up pleading no powers to act.

If we are to have higher standards in press, if we are to provide a climate in which journalists can enforce high standards, we need good legislation establishing an open, accountable, swift and effective form of regulation - not the Press Complaints Commission.

R.Shannon, *A Press Free and Responsible. Self-Regulation and the Press Complaints Commission 1991-2001* (London, John Murray, 2001)

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THE LOCAL RAG

JOHNSTON Press, the local newspaper publisher based in Scotland is on the acquisitions trail. At the same time as it is being investigated by the Competition Commission over its attempt to purchase a clutch of titles from Trinity Mirror in Northhamptonshire, it has purchased Regional Independent Media (RIM), owner of the Yorkshire Post and 52 other titles in Yorkshire and the North West, for £560 million.

The deal now makes Johnston Britain's fourth largest regional newspaper owner, and the news was applauded in the business press. Johnston expects to make annual savings of £9 million and push RIM's operating margins of 23 per cent up to Johnston's 30 per cent. Good news for the City.

But there is another side to the relentless expansion of Johnston. It is now the publisher of 243 titles, mostly small weekly or evening titles, and sells 8.7 million papers a week. One view is that it has succeeded by cutting costs and diluting the quality of its journalism.

One case has caused it some embarrassment. Don Hale was the award-winning editor of the Matlock Mercury who waged a successful seven-year campaign for the release of Stephen Downing, who spent 27 years in jail for the murder of Wendy Sewell. However Hale's pursuit of justice clashed uncomfortably with local power structures - and pressure was put on him not to pursue the story. In the end he worked evenings and weekends on the story so that he couldn't be sacked for wasting company time.

Nick Cohen in a piece in New Statesman (11 February, 2002) comments, 'Johnston managers didn't see it as the job of its journalists to upset people in power. The tiny staff had been halved over a decade to four journalists. They were paid to recycle press releases and puff local shops, not to create a scandal.'

Don Hale's book is due out soon, the BBC is doing a feature-length drama in the autumn, and even Hollywood is interested. He is also the recipient of 14 awards for his dogged and determined investigation.

Who owns a chain of newspapers matters, and across West and South Yorkshire, one thing that the Yorkshire Post did was break the Donnygate scandal in Doncaster, and another important corruption case in Wakefield involving councillors. It is the case that Johnston owned both the Doncaster Advertiser and the Wakefield Express but it was the Leeds-based Yorkshire Post that pursued the stories.

BOOK REVIEW

Dot.com: the greatest story ever told
Jon Cassidy; Penguin £9.99

This is an excellent book, endorsed by John Kenneth Galbraith no less, whose own account of the Great Crash of 1929 explored another phase in the process of insane speculation.

Politicians, investment bankers and venture capitalists became cheerleaders for the 'new economy' and the internet revolution. Of course it wasn't just about investing in dot.com companies. There was also a telecoms goldrush fuelled by the same lethal combination of unfettered greed and flawed thinking.

One example. Six hundred pairs of fibre optic cable link cities like London, Paris, Brussels and Frankfurt. Billions of pounds of investors' money was poured into the ground. Instead of huge amounts of data winging around the internet, only a single pair of cable is needed to satisfy Western Europe's present demand for data traffic.

The book concentrates on the USA but the parallels with the dot.com mania that also hit the UK are obvious. There is one telling chapter on the role of the media in boosting the unreal expectations of the internet economy. Apart from The Economist which tentatively questioned the basis for the excessive claims of the internet zealots the media not only endorsed these but also rushed to be part of process. Cassidy lists the magazines spawned in the age of railway speculation, and compares that era to the period of the late 90s which saw a flood of magazines, specialist supplements and internet journalism ventures.

Most of these have disappeared but one, Wired, the apostle of the new internet world, still exists in a changed and chastened form. In a recent issue a list of best sellers all dealt with the dot.com mania. Cassidy's analysis of the enormous speculative bubble is, rightly, up there at the top.

The Global Media Atlas by Mark Balnaves, James Donald and Stephanie Hemelryk Donald BFI £13.99

This is an interesting book that attempts to make graphic sense of a mass of global communications data. It is divided into eight sections with headings like 'The Information Age', 'Ownership and Control' 'The Press and Radio' and 'Information and Communication Technology' and within each section analyses in detail specific themes.

For example a spread on Access to Ideas works well, giving a dramatic illustration of literacy rates, access to public libraries, and access to the internet from schools. Other sections also work well, but some did seem too skimpy both in the actual amount of information and in the analysis accompanying the illustrations. The Ownership and Control section could have been more substantial, for example.

However it is the sort of publication that should be useful for older students in colleges and one that should be on the reference shelves in libraries too.

Granville Williams

The axis of spin

TUCKED away in the Media Section of The Independent on 19 March was the only British press interview with Tucker Eskew.

Who he? He is director of the Office of Media Affairs at the White House, and No 2 to Karen Hughes, the President's chief press spokesperson. Alastair Campbell and his No 10 communications colleague, Phil Bassett went to see Karen Hughes in Washington in October 2001.

'The trip gave birth to the Coalition Information Centre (CIC), a three-pronged rebuttal and publicity operation based in Washington, London and Islamabad,' Donald Macintyre writes in The Independent. Eskew was in London as part of 'a joint media and propaganda operation, little publicised in Britain and unprecedented, even in the Second World War'.

For Alastair Campbell the decision to establish the CIC (which involved representatives of nine coalition countries, but driven mainly by the US and UK) was based on the Kosovan experience when the allies frequently lost the initiative in a battle for public opinion dominated by reports of inaccurate bombing and civilian casualties.

Tucker Eskew is proud of the CIC's successes, among which he counts 'rebutting' Taliban claims of civilian casualties.

Donald Macintyre concludes his piece with the thought about if and when the allies begin military action against Iraq. Tucker Eskew knows the lesson of the CIC's work is that there will be a better equipped, better staffed rapid-response team in place.

Wales - more public debate needed

Tom O'Malley

OVER seventy people turned up to a public meeting on government plans for the media in Wales on February 7th in Cardiff. The meeting was organised by BECTU, NUJ, the Writers Guild of Great Britain and the CPBF. This was a very well attended meeting with a range of women, men, and ethnic minorities who live in Wales, as well as those who work in the media in the audience. The size of the turnout was testimony to the range of concerns raised by the government's planned changes in media policy.

Kevin Williams Professor of Media Studies at Swansea University argued for future Welsh broadcasting policy to be developed within a public service framework. He viewed the planned Office of Communications (Ofcom) as 'a very dangerous organisation in the making'.

Tony Lennon, President of BECTU criticised the way the government lacked a clear sense of direction on the issue of the technical 'platforms' for new digital media. He supported a Welsh presence on Ofcom and pointed out that the White Paper on Communications does nothing about the way in which the board of S4C is directly appointed from London. He wondered whether the new Ofcom would make future operators stick to public service obligations.

Colin Thomas of Black Light, demon-

strated that ethnic minorities were appallingly under represented in the workforce in the Welsh media. There needed to be active monitoring of the composition of the workforce to ensure equal opportunities, especially amongst independent producers, where no such monitoring took place. He called for an end to the practice of positive discrimination in favour of white men in the industry.

John Foster, General Secretary of the NUJ, argued that the Welsh National Assembly was an important institution for the articulation and expression of concerns around the media. The White Paper was a continuation of attacks on public services, like transport and health, that went back to the 1980s. Democracy, he argued, had been well served by the public service tradition, particularly in the way it fostered high quality news and current affairs. By attacking this framework the White Paper was posing a threat to democratic values.

Geraint Talfan-Davies, the Member for Wales on the Radio Authority, criticised plans for Ofcom. There would only be a maximum of 6 non-executive members, covering a massive range of commercial, technical and cultural issues. It would not be easy to find people who could cover all this ground. The structure of Ofcom below board level needed careful thought, so as to allow proper regulation of discrete media like radio, and to foster real links with Wales and Scotland.

Rhodri Glyn Thomas AM, Chair of the National Assembly's Culture Committee,

speaking in his capacity as a Plaid AM, expressed concern about the proposals in the White Paper, especially about their likely effects on Welsh commercial TV. He saw a real need to 'ensure a debate takes place' in Wales about the proposals, and welcomed a call from the floor for the National Assembly's Culture Committee to hold public hearings on the issues.

Peter Edwards, Head of Drama development at HTV, pointed to the gloomy state of drama production in that company under the already tight competitive condition. HTV had implemented a cut in drama output from around 20 to 11 hours. Other speakers called for an extension of the debate on the government proposals to include more people in Wales.

A number of people signed up to continue working on these issues, and the organisers plan further interventions on the issue in the coming months.

CPBF AGM 2002

Saturday 29 June

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Mabledon Place London WC1

(Stations - Euston & Kings Cross)

Registration 9.30am

AGM 10.00-12.30

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on the future of the CPBF.*

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