

# FREE Press

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## A MARKET-DRIVEN BILL



### GRANVILLE WILLIAMS

THE COMMUNICATIONS Bill, published on 7 May, will leave Britain's media almost entirely shaped by market forces. The US news magazine, *Time*, (20/5/2) got it right when it said the Bill 'threw open the airwaves to non-EU countries in a way not yet seen in Europe. The rules are a free-for-all: national newspapers and media giants like AOL Time Warner, Viacom and Disney can now buy commercial TV channels, while US concerns like Clear Channel are free to snap up radio stations.'

US media groups are jostling for position to enter the biggest English-speaking market outside America. 'They have been waiting for this chance a long time. When the bidding finishes, Europe might even sneak a peek at its own broadcasting future,' the report concludes.

There are essentially two prongs to the Bill. The first is a radical redrawing of the media ownership rules which will make them the most liberal in the world. They make nonsense of the Culture Minister's claim that the Bill 'will protect the diversity and plurality of our media'.

The rule preventing non-EU ownership of our media will go; national newspapers can own Channel 5, national radio and local radio stations; a single ITV will be allowed; ITV regional franchises can also own local radio licences; and newspaper mergers will not require prior consent.

It is a bonfire of all the rules that were there to protect diversity, and the media companies will be extremely pleased about most of them.

The second prong is the move towards 'light touch' regulation. As Julian Petley, Chair of the Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom, points out, "The government, by its own admission, is embarking upon 'a significant deregulation in media ownership to promote competition'. This will roll back regulatory safeguards in the media."

By setting up a centralised Office of Communications (OFCOM), watering down public service broadcasting obligations and loosening ownership regulations, the Bill will sideline quality, accountability and diversity. It will also result in less distinctive, regional and local news, entertainment and cultural programmes as both press and broadcasting outlets become concentrated in fewer hands.

Media Secretary Tessa Jowell's argument that the media have been over-regulated and over-protected is nonsense. The success of British broadcasting has been based on positive regulation designed to promote high quality content. Now we will see power concentrated in the hands of unaccountable bureaucrats and media owners. The government needs to change the Bill if we are to avoid ending up with a broadcasting system dominated by big business,

Continued on page 8

## We need your cash

£20,000 is the target

GEOFF MASON

CPBF National Treasurer

WE PUT our financial appeal on the inside pages of the last issue. This time it's on the front page, given equal prominence with the Communications Bill. The two issues are linked.

Originally we had the funds to respond to the government's plans, as we thought they would have done the job by Summer 2002. Now it won't be until the summer 2003. Funds are running out just when we need to put the maximum effort into modifying some of the dire proposals in the Communications Bill. Our main efforts have to be:

- To publicise the damage to broadcasting of the government's proposals. We want to produce an updated version of 'The Communications Revolution: Who Benefits?' and work with a wide range of organisations to ensure that MPs are aware of public disquiet about the proposals in the Communications Bill.

- To lobby effectively and ensure that the committee of 12 MPs and peers who are to examine the draft Communications Bill have solid evidence which challenges the government's arguments and assumptions in the document.

We need to raise £20,000 by appealing to our members and supporters for any cash they can donate - and we are grateful for the cash sent as a result of the first appeal in the last issue. We will also be approaching unions to ask for larger sums. And finally we need more members of the CPBF - there's a special membership offer in this issue. Can you persuade a friend or colleague to sign up?

If we don't raise the money cuts will follow. Not to be able to respond effectively to this important media legislation would be terrible. Please do all you can to help.

## THREAT TO SCOTLAND

IN WATERING down media companies' obligations to public service broadcasting the Bill threatens the continued existence of distinctive Scottish programming and Scottish cultural identity.

Rory MacLeod, CPBF Scottish spokesperson, points out, "The Bill offers chunks of the media up for sale to large corporations concerned primarily with profit, not quality programming. This will have big implications for us in Scotland. The majority of media in Scotland - print media, TV, radio, programme production and advertising - could end up being owned by companies with no Scottish connection, thus leading to the disappearance of a Scottish identity within programming and media."

There will be far less scope for distinctive regional and local news, entertainment and cultural programmes as both press and broadcasting outlets become concentrated in fewer hands. "The people of Scotland deserve news and programming providers who give them the news and media that reflect the needs - both culturally and informatively - of those who live in this country. While the Communications Bill is a reserved matter, the Scottish Parliament should debate it publicly because of the massive cultural implications it will have for Scotland and its people," he believes.

## A PUBLICLY-OWNED DIGITAL TERRESTRIAL PLATFORM

**LEWIS FROST** argues the case 2010 REMAINS the government's target for switch over when all TV will be digitally broadcast. After the collapse of ITV Digital the government still hopes that another commercial company or consortium would come forward to provide that terrestrial platform. The significance of the terrestrial platform as opposed to satellite or cable is that it is the only practical way of achieving universal reach. The establishment of a privately owned terrestrial platform to carry both public service and commercial channels will be a strategic mistake for a number of reasons.

Firstly from an economic point of view why pay high access fees when you could finance the platform

yourself and charge the commercial companies to access it. It would be similar in some respects to the government allowing the private sector to build hospitals who then charge the NHS costs plus a tidy profit year upon year to use the facilities.

There are other good reasons why we need a publicly owned digital terrestrial platform. The government looks to growth in the technology and Telecoms sector to put the whole economy back on its feet again. Given the uncertainties around the new technology and the large debts which Telecoms companies have saddled themselves with, no one from the private sector has come forward to make the ITV Digital platform work. Infrastructure developments of this kind, with universal access for all, are difficult for the private sector to achieve and they are not best placed to do it.

However, if the government owned the platform provider and gave every household a free digital set top box, the expansion in digital medium would be enormous and it would give the technology and Telecoms sector a much needed boost. Set top boxes (costing at about £100 currently) could be made universally available at low or no price. This can be financed through charging the commercial broadcasters who use the platform, and of course leasing the radio spectrum that it makes available when analogue signal is switched over to digital. Viewers wanting to subscribe to pay-to-view and commercial channels would simply be sent an unlocking card to plug into the box.

The new digital terrestrial platform will be the primary carrier of television to the nation in future. The government has said that any privately owned terrestrial platform/s would be required to carry the existing digital public service channels free-to-air. But a provision with this national significance is too culturally and politically important to be left to a private consortium that can dictate terms of access. This throws away the enormous opportunity of a publicly owned platform which could allow many different kinds of broadcasters on air - non-commercial, community, regional broadcasters, other services that haven't even been thought of yet. The real diversification of broadcasting, the renaissance which digital technology could spark, will be strangled at birth by price

constraints imposed by the debt ridden Telecoms companies.

A publicly owned platform would also mean that the future shape and form of broadcasting was not just decided de facto by global media corporations. The public platform would challenge the current dominance of multi-channel TV by the commercial providers on satellite (BSkyB) and cable and offer a broader and more diverse television culture.

## CITIZENS & CONSUMERS

**SEAN TUNNEY**

LANGUAGE IS an important indicator of the underlying assumptions in a Bill.

The emphasis that people are primarily the consumers of media goods is marked in the draft Bill, compared to the proposal summary and policy narrative. These pieces repeatedly use the term citizens, indicating an understanding of the particular role of the media in democratic debate.

Yet, in the draft Bill, the provisions for democratic representation come with the advisory Consumer Panel. Its responsibilities are concentrated on providing customer redress, rather than representing individuals in ensuring the media plays a role in providing alternative viewpoints for an informed citizenry. In fact, the terms citizen or citizens appears 16 times in the summary and policy narrative. Yet, the draft Bill itself used the term only once, when referring to "citizens of the European Union". In contrast, the draft Bill itself used the terms customer/customers 82 times and consumer/consumers 20 times.

## TIERS THREAT TO PUBLIC SERVICE

**PAT HOLLAND**

THE COMMUNICATIONS Bill attempts to hold together two conflicting aims; to deregulate business, giving more freedom to the owners of communications companies, and to protect broadcasting as a public service. The summary to the Bill states, 'governments all over the world, across Europe and America recognise that relying on competition policy alone may jeopardise the effective operation of modern democracy'.

Despite the assertion of two aims, the main thrust of the Bill is a move to free market economics, and, in line with this, it outlines a concept of public service which is drastically curtailed.

## THE TIERS

The creation of tiers of public service responsibility puts the onus on the BBC to provide the full range, while excluding Pay-TV broadcasters (notably Sky) from any obligation to be part of a regulated system. ITV, C4&5 will become 'self-regulated' in an aim to move away from 'box ticking' - ie specific positive requirement by the regulator on the content of the output.

The danger of this system is that the BBC may be seen as the public service broadcaster, and will be criticised (as it already has been) if it competes effectively with entertainment and other programmes which attract mass audiences. The value of the BBC is its rich and diverse mix. This must not come under threat. Given the structure of OFCOM and its stated de-regulatory aims, the BBC should remain separately regulated.

The ITV companies, which have long operated in tension between their commercial and their public service commitments, will use their 'self-regulatory' status to limit the diversity of their programmes, and concentrate on the block busters. This is especially likely to be true when ownership limits are lifted, the number of ITV companies becomes even smaller, and enormous multinationals, whether European or US based, take a stake. Positive regulation should be strengthened.

Pay-TV companies remain outside the regulatory framework altogether, with no obligations, for example, for domestic production, factual or educational content or provision for children. These should be included within the regulatory framework.

The convergence between digital TV and the Internet is not discussed. This is a huge oversight since TV is already receivable via computer equipment and the Internet accessible via digital TV sets. Most programmes have linked websites, and public interaction and debate about television content occurs via the Internet. There should be research into overlap and convergence, and clearer statements about broadcasters' obligations when using other media, bearing in mind that these media, too are potentially part of a public service system.

## THE CONTENT BOARD

OF COM is required to 'establish and maintain' a Content Board to ensure 'that the "public interest" in the nature and quality of television and

radio programmes is represented within OFCOM's overall structure.'

This is envisaged as a committee of OFCOM, but effectively the Board will be the body which will be monitoring the entire output of television. It will be broadly representative - specifically including representatives from the nations and regions. However, it does not appear to have specific responsibility for the public service remit placed on terrestrial broadcasters.

It is essential that this body has actual powers. It should be independent of OFCOM and be able to require OFCOM to take action when necessary. (Rich and powerful internationally based media owners are not likely to respond to UK content requirements unless they are backed by effective sanctions.) It should be able to draw up its own guidelines on the balance of output, and should have a budget for the sort of research currently carried out by the Broadcasting Standards Commission.

Overall, the Content Board should act as an effective counterbalance to profit-driven pressures and its work should be directly linked to public service commitments, and the concept of a public service system.

## INTERNATIONAL OWNERSHIP—WHO BENEFITS?

**SEAN TUNNEY**

THERE IS evidence that a governmental strategy to open up market sectors does not lead to enhanced national economic performance. Even those writers that are the most enthusiastic proponents of globalisation question whether a strategy to expand home-based multinational business and improve their economic performance adds to the economic well-being of a home nation. In fact, research evidence bears out the idea of that there is a progressive divorce between national economic performance and that of the home-based multinationals. (See Held and others, *Global transformations: politics, economics and culture*, 1999, p. 280-1)

Thus, the argument that loosening ownership rules guarantees the survival of such firms, or at least strengthens the possibility of enhanced economic performance through economies of scale, is doubly fraught with difficulty. Most

importantly, it is detrimental to diversity and thus democratic debate. But also, such a policy is unlikely to add to the nation's economic wealth.

In the case of the draft Communications Bill, the opening up of terrestrial television to international ownership without reciprocal agreements, does not aid British-based multinationals to expand abroad. Instead, it makes it possible for foreign-based transnationals to squeeze them out in Britain. British international competitiveness is not advanced, which has been a goal of government economic policy. It may be the case that, as the policy summary suggests, that the opening up of markets would lead to inward investment. However, it is not so clear that the profits from this investment would be retained in this country.

## WILL THE US CHANGE ITS RULES?

When directly asked whether the British government would lobby the United States to reciprocate the British gesture and get rid of the rule requiring owners of US media to be US citizens, Culture Minister Tessa Jowell answered on The Guardian web discussion, May 10: "The World Trade Organisation is the only route and we will pursue this to establish reciprocity but this, as things do with the WTO, take a long time. We want to move quickly to open our media up to the potential investment from other countries."

## THE BBC

**TOM O'MALLEY**

THE BILL proposes to ultimately apply the same deregulatory standards to the BBC as it does to its commercial competitors. Thus 'the BBC's position will be brought closer to other broadcasters'. OFCOM, whose main purpose is to promote economic competition in the media as well as to lift 'burdens' in the sector, will be bringing its overwhelmingly commercially orientated outlook to bear on the BBC. It is like giving burglars the key to your house.

Commercial operators whose interests OFCOM has been created to uphold, will be able to pressurise OFCOM into demanding that the BBC does not compete with them in areas where they believe they could make a killing.

The BBC should be left out of OFCOM

# Democratic right...

**KIM SABIDO** was the reporter for Independent Radio News (IRN), sent with the Task Force to report on the British attempt to retake the Falkland Islands. These are his reflections on the experience.

FOR THE majority of the British people living, as they do, within what's very easy to label a social 'gold fish' bowl - protected from the worst elements of dictatorship or fascism by a democratic shield - it's easy to forget just how precious democracy really is.

Indeed, it's assumed by most of us that freedom of speech is a given and it's not until you've experienced the state's continuously evolving attempts at media manipulation and control at first hand that you realise just how thin that line between real and approved truth really is.

There were, and still are, some very basic principles involving the media and the public's right to know that were subsumed beneath the jingoism and political triumphalism that often blurred the public's focus during the three months of the Falklands Crisis.

There is little holding you back from an impulsive desire to "go for it" when your news desk suddenly drags you back from the pub whilst on late shift to tell you to pack your bags and get on a train to the South Coast. To be fair, I had been primed with the news that the Ministry of Defence (MOD) had requested a name for a "possible" list of correspondents who "may" be required to accompany the Task Force then being assembled to retake the Falkland Islands from the Argentine. At Southampton, I was handed an MOD accreditation card that had last seen the light of day during the Suez crisis! We were all, reporters, minders, and especially the government, working from a completely blank sheet, and it showed.

**PINNED DOWN**

My experience of armed conflict of any form up till then, had been on the streets of Belfast and Derry as the Provisional IRA exchanged bullets with the RUC and British army. And even then I'd exhibited the raw nerves of a rookie: finding myself in the middle of the Falls Road as shots began to ricochet from the masonry around me, I'd pinned myself and my tape recorder

firmly against an anonymous front door until the all-clear was sounded.

That, therefore, had been my sole training for the conflict to come in the South Atlantic. Was it a fair fight and did the British people and the rest of the world get the information and news they deserved? Quite frankly, no.

Did it make a huge difference in the end? In my opinion, perhaps not a great deal, yet I come back to that sacred point of Freedom of Information. Much of what was being fed to the British public over their bacon and eggs every morning was, in my view, decidedly pre-formulated and contrived. Much of it repackaged to suit the government's agenda.

Could we disclose the whereabouts and make-up of our forces around and on the Falklands? No. And neither should we have. Yet it sickened many of us when, after much of our copy on just how brave the last moments of a certain officer's life had been as he'd grappled to defuse an unexploded bomb on one of the several Royal Navy vessels laying at anchor offshore, had been altered and neutered to such an extent that it made very little sense, when we suddenly hear, over the World Service, virtually the entire contents of the plans for the landing almost down to exactly when and where it would happen. As the "hacks" on board, we were immediately blamed for the "leak" and suffered a terrible backlash from the task force rank and file. Yet senior government ministers and civil servants working to a political agenda had leaked the news to the British media.

**TERRIFYING**

Whilst training with 42 Commando, Royal Marines, aboard the Canberra, I had developed a very close relationship with ordinary soldiers and their officers. So much so, that, in the end, they agreed to allow me to accompany them in the attack on Mount Harriet. The night-time operation across mountainous terrain and the bitter fighting that ensued was the most terrifying of my life. Not that I had time either to stop and think that, or to contemplate the situation I had talked myself into. It was only afterwards that I could look back on it and stare, in blank horror, at what had occurred in those few hours atop Mount Harriet.

Reporting what you've seen and expressing your feelings about what had been going on is, I believe, the duty of every self-respecting journalist: to tell the reader/listener what they would have seen had they been there themselves. It is only when you're back home in the comfort of your own domestic surroundings that you have the time to look back on what you've been doing in a military context, and to work out whether you really were true to yourself and, more importantly, to the public you profess to serve.

**THE "MINDERS"**

When I look back, even now, I realise that what I was sending back from the Falklands was only a small part of the overall picture the rest of the world was getting, and, inevitably, a very personal one. My "battle" reports were being fed to the public amid political "spin" far stronger than anything the Blair government could manufacture now.

We were accompanied down South by a team of Ministry press officers, the "Minders" and another set of military officers delegated to be their units' Public Relations Officers. They were, in truth, as innocent as us in knowing the size and scope of their work once hostilities began and just how to react to it. Anxious to promote their units they were also extremely aware of the hot breathe of the Men from the Ministry!

To be fair, even the "Minders" were a little out of their depths. They often found themselves being pulled three ways: by their paymasters back in Whitehall anxious that "the Fourth Estate" would not be allowed too much of a free rein and thereby get away with telling the truth about some of the ghastly mistakes and disasters that plagued our forces; by the military on the ground who often had more important things to do than to respond to seemingly mindless media enquiries; and by us

constantly scratching at their doors seeking updated information on this or that operation or to have our copy checked and sometimes "censored". Indeed, on some occasion I attempted to outwit them by sending a series of dissociated words tagged on to the end of my report hoping my editors would twig and slot the words in to make up the gaps subbed out by the censors. It didn't really work! Later, in a more reflective mood, I could quite honestly feel sorry for them and their lot: caught, sometimes almost literally, between a rock and a hard place!

**RIPPED APART**

It has taken a good few years for the truth about our operational "luck" in the South Atlantic to come out. That few of the Argentine bombs ever exploded was a plain truth to us there and certainly, had it been publicised, it would have put all our lives in danger. So, as far as the obvious, sensible self-censoring reporting restrictions were concerned, we were all, I believe, in perfect harmony. We were, after all, at war, albeit undeclared.

When I went with Lima Company, 42 Cdo. up Mount Harriet, I little knew what I was letting myself in for. I'd watched from atop a mountain as the Sir Galahad was ripped apart by Argentine fighter bombers and had helped as best I could as the dead, dying and disfigured were brought ashore to Ajax Bay's make-shift hospital unit, and had crouched below rocks as Marines fell wounded nearby on Mounts Kent and Harriet, yet all my professionalism was compartmentalised, locked away deep in my subconscious.

I acted and reacted on impulse and to strict commands from the Commandos around me. Indeed, were it not for the swift actions of Sergeant Cameron March on that freezing night up Mount Harriet I'm not sure I would be writing this now. He rugby-tackled me to the ground as I attempted to record the sounds of bullets ricocheting off the rocks above me. Stupid? Absolutely. Innocent? Undoubtedly. Prepared? No way. And perhaps therein lies the crux. I argue now for proper training and adequate insurance to benefit any loved-ones that may be left behind should one suffer what a lot of journalists have already and no doubt

will continue to suffer in the coming years as we attempt to "report the truth" from the frontline. But in the final analysis, are there many of us with the cool detachment and determination to be able to say "No" when that last-minute call comes through from the news desk: "Nip home and pack a bag, we're sending you to..."? After all, we come into this profession to report and what better material to report on than a war?

It is perhaps even more ironic that, on the tenth anniversary of the conflict I was invited down to near Exeter for the unveiling of a statue modelled on the famous photograph of a Royal Marine in full combat gear holding the Union Jack aloft on the hills overlooking Stanley. Inside the canvas pavilion that hosted the champagne reception was the secret "special guest" who'd unveiled the statue. Of course, the guest was none other than the newly ennobled Lady Thatcher and I was doing my best to avoid contact.

Unfortunately mine host, Maj. General Julian Thompson, the commander of the land forces in the Falklands, spotted my disdain and guided Lady Thatcher over to me. On being informed that I was the reporter that had accompanied 42Cdo. in its attack on Mount Harriet, she launched into a savage verbal attack. Having avoided the famous "hand bagging" on so many previous occasions, I was promptly accused of being personally responsible for the deaths of all those who died on Sir Galahad and the Atlantic Conveyor as they waited to discharge troops and equipment onto the beaches.

I vainly attempted to inform her that that privilege had fallen to her own civil servants and, dare I say it, her own Cabinet members! Well I might as well have been talking to the cat! She turned on me, claiming that, as a reporter, I had been the "sieve and cipher" of the news that had come came for the Task Force and had been picked up by the Argentineans. As for that idea of a Free Press! Do me a favour. We may live in a democracy, but my experience of political manipulation and subterfuge within a so-called "democracy", even at a few thousand miles distance, has taught me one thing: at least in a dictatorship, you know where you stand!

# ...or wartime luxury?

# DIRTY DEALINGS

## Labour, the porn king and £100,000



New Labour and shabby dealings

BACK IN 1990 David Sullivan, owner of the Sport, Sunday Sport and a chain of sex shops wanted the Bristol Evening Post. He was prevented from doing so after a report by the Monopoly and Mergers Commission (forerunner of the Competition Commission) blocked the deal in May 1990 for being against the public interest. The MMC was worried about possible editorial interference from Mr Sullivan, and pointed to the 'sexually orientated' nature of his other business interests.

Fast forward to November 2000. Labour peer, Lord Hollick, is busy selling off his TV and newspaper assets after the failed merger of Carlton and United News and Media,

and announces that he has sold Express newspapers to Richard Desmond for £125 million. It was totally unexpected, and the news of the £100,000 donation by Richard Desmond to Labour does prompt the awkward questions about how and why the purchase of Express Newspapers was cleared.

After all, both Lord Hollick and Richard Desmond must have been aware of the fate of Mr Sullivan's bid. There was a speculative account of what happened, written by Tom Leonard and Matt Born, in The Daily Telegraph (17/5/2). They quote Rosie Boycott, who resigned as Express editor in January 2001. She believes that Lord Hollick was confident about the sale because he had discussed it with Labour's top brass, to whom he was close, as well as been a former special adviser to the DTI.

Within ten minutes of the sale being announced Downing Street phoned Desmond and invited him to meet the Prime Minister. The timetable of Desmond's dealings with Downing Street, and the clearance of the sale when Stephen Byers announced he would not refer the takeover of Express Newspapers to the Competition Commission, do seem a little too neat and tidy:

■ November 22 2000: Desmond's Northern and Shell Media group pays £125 million for Express Newspaper Group

■ November 26 2000: Desmond visits Downing Street for 30 minute chat with Tony Blair

■ New Year 2001: Desmond tells senior Labour figures he is willing to offer free advertising in election run-up. Offer declined in favour of donation

■ January 10 2001: Desmond offers to sell his porn titles to concentrate on Express Newspapers. They are still under his ownership

■ February 7 2001: The takeover will not be referred to the Competition Commission, Stephen Byers announces

■ February 15 2001: Last date before party donations have to be published by Electoral Commission. Also believed to be the date Labour banks £100,000 donation from Desmond.

Former Express editor, Rosie Boycott, left the Labour Party and joined the Social Democrats in October 2001. 'I think it's unbelievably shabby that the Labour Party took the money from him,' she said. 'You feel there aren't too many depths left that they have to plumb. It's not so much his fault as theirs. They were prepared to take his shilling, yet they could have kept an arm's length relationship with him. The whole thing stinks.'

Difficult to disagree with that.

# Carving up regional newspapers

It's ODD really how much fuss a simple deal between two big players in the regional newspaper industry, Trinity Mirror and Johnston Press, has caused. It's not as if this is even one of the bigger deals. We're talking about eight free titles in the Peterborough, Derby and Northampton areas. Small beer compared with much bigger deals that have just been nodded through without any fuss, or even an inquiry.

So what happened? The proposed transfer of the titles to Johnston meant that the company would be in a dominant position - in the case of four titles in and around

Northampton and Peterborough with virtually 100 percent of the local newspaper market.

This was also a tidying-up deal between two of the top regional publishers of local and regional papers. In 2001 its turnover was £301 million and its operating profit £90 million, an operating margin of 30%. Trinity Mirror is the largest publisher of regional and local newspapers in the UK but it was willing to let the eight titles go to Johnston

The Competition Commission report on the proposed merger, the result of a six-month inquiry, makes

interesting reading.\* Apart from the fact that it brings together a mass of data on the particular case it also takes a wider view of the behaviour of the big regional newspaper groups. Its conclusions are also unusual because it gave the go-ahead for the transfer of four of the titles - the Brackley and Towcester Post, the Derby Trader, the Harborough Herald and Post and The Trader. However the commission found that the transfer of the other four - the East Northants Herald and Post, the Northampton Herald and Post, the Peterborough Herald and Post and the Stamford Herald and Post - would 'be expected to operate

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# Canadian CPBF plans MEDIA DEMOCRACY DAY

BOB HACKETT  
CPBF VANCOUVER CHAPTER

THE CANADIAN CPBF was originally formed as a common front to contest escalating press concentration when Conrad Black's Hollinger Inc. took over the country's largest newspaper chain in 1996.

Today, Conrad Black has decamped to the UK but the Canadian CPBF carries on. It is in the process of incorporating itself in hopes of becoming a permanent and national organisation, in order to better continue raising public awareness and policy interventions on the implications of corporate media bias, convergence and concentration. Mergers and take-overs in the past two years have included the expansion of the Asper family's CanWest empire from its TV network base to incorporate Internet properties and much of His Blackness's former newspapers. With little to fear from either competition or regulators at the moment, CanWest has brazenly adopted a practice of requiring its major dailies to publish several editorial per week produced from corporate head office - and, more significantly, not to take editorial positions contrary to the Asper party line. Even some of Canada's most conservative media columnists and commentators have expressed alarm at this centralisation of corporate power to influence the public agenda.

That's one of the reasons CPBF chapters in Toronto and Vancouver are gearing up for the second Media Democracy Day next October 18. Last year's event was a very successful day

of protest, networking, celebration and education. In Vancouver, 400 people turned out to hear feminist author and broadcaster Judy Rebick call for a broader coalition for media democratisation, and to celebrate the achievements of dozens of local independent media outlets and media activist groups - from the Independent Media Centre to the university-based NewsWatch Canada.

Fortuitously, October 18 is also the start of a three-day Summit of the newly forming Action Coalition for Media Education (ACME), in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Attracting the support of dozens of prominent thinkers and groups in the US, including Robert McChesney and Danny Schechter's Media Channel, the vision is to build a strategic network that is free from corporate funding and dedicated to creating positive changes in media education through activism, and forging creative links between media educators and media reformers.

The British CPBF and its members and supporters are warmly invited to arrange local or even national events next October 18, as a way of building solidarity between democratic media reformers, raising our collective public profile, and making Media Democracy Day 2002 a truly international one.

For more information, visit [www.presscampaign.org](http://www.presscampaign.org) (Canadian CPBF), [www.mediademocracyday.org](http://www.mediademocracyday.org), and [www.acmecoalition.org](http://www.acmecoalition.org)

against the public interest'.

Following the report, Trinity Mirror pulled out of the deal entirely.

But the other aspect of the report, which may have far wider repercussions, is the concern about 'cluster publishing' and the 'live and let live' attitude among major publishers. Tremendous change has taken place in the regional newspaper industry, with more and more titles concentrated in the hands of fewer and fewer owners. The extent of this is illustrated by the following trends. In 1992 there were 200 companies, many family owned, publishing local and regional newspapers; by 1998 there were 137, and now it is less than 100. At the same time the top five groups dominating the market own 72% of all newspapers published in the UK. In 1990 the figure was 43%.

The report summarises the economic benefits for the big groups - economies of scale publishing several titles from a single centre, savings in production, administration, sales and pooling of editorial resources. But the report also identifies a number of concerns. Opportunities for new launches become problematic where one newspaper group owns all the titles in an area. Also cluster publishing eliminates competitive pressure and can work to the disadvantage of advertisers who may see ad rates rise when groups have regional monopolies.

As a result of the report Competition minister Melanie Johnson has asked the Director General of Fair Trading to consider whether to initiate an industry-wide inquiry into consolidation of the regional press. Whilst this is welcome the inevitable question is, why it didn't happen before? Since 1990 there have been twenty Commission reports on proposed transfers of newspapers, but only three were adverse. The consequence has been consolidation by the big regional newspaper groups.

\* Johnston Press plc and Trinity Mirror plc: A report on the proposed merger, Stationery Office, Cm 5495 £25.00

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## CPBF NEWS

### JOIN THE CPBF

FREE COPY of Robert McChesney's Rich Media, Poor Democracy (worth £12) for people joining as supporting members (£25) See membership form below.

### PUBLIC MEETING

13 June 2002 6.15pm - 8.00pm  
NUJ HQ 308/312 Gray's Inn Road,  
London WC1

A RARE opportunity to hear Robert McChesney speak on the US experience of media deregulation. He will be joined by Granville Williams (Free Press editor) who will put the Campaign's concerns about the Communications Bill. Admission free. Collection for the CPBF.

### COMMUNITY MEDIA FESTIVAL

14-15 June 2002  
The Hotel Metropole,  
Leeds LS1 2HQ

AN EVENT looking towards the future and celebrating the range and diversity in community radio. This is the first Summer Festival the Community Media Association have organised and it will feature debate and discussion on all the issues affecting the

community media sector. Full information on the festival is on the CMA website:  
[www.commedia.org.uk/festival2002](http://www.commedia.org.uk/festival2002)

### BECTU CONFERENCE ON THE COMMUNICATIONS BILL

Saturday 22 June 10.30am- 2.30pm  
The Resource Centre,  
Holloway Road, Islington,  
London N7 6PA

**Conference Chair:** Tony Lennon, (BECTU President and CPBF National Council Member.)

**Speakers include:** Chris Smith MP, Christy Swords (Granada Media Group), Caroline Thompson (BBC, Director of Public Policy), Steve Barnett (University of Westminster) and Tom O'Malley (CPBF).

### CAMPAIGN FOR PRESS & BROADCASTING FREEDOM AGM

Saturday 29 June, 10am-12.30pm  
Hamilton House, Mabledon Place  
London WC1.

Stations - Euston & Kings Cross

Registration 9.30am

**Please do all you can to attend. There will be an important discussion on the future of the CPBF.**

## A MARKET-DRIVEN BILL

(Continued from page 1)

such as exists in the USA.

In both Europe and the United States we are seeing the growing overlap of media power and political power. Silvio Berlusconi in Italy, Rupert Murdoch here, and in the United States the awesome lobbying and political clout of the big media groups who before the 1996 Telecommunications Act ensured they got what they wanted out of it. Since then they have relentlessly lobbied for the end of other restrictions on media ownership, and have a friendly ear in the Federal Communications Commission chair, Michael Powell, whose view of media ownership rules is 'Validate or Eliminate'.

Working closely with the media and communications trade unions and community organisations CPBF will campaign for public scrutiny of the Communications Bill. It will press for the joint committee of both Houses at Westminster responsible for streamlining the Bill to hold public hearings and for the Scottish Parliament and Welsh and Northern Ireland Assemblies to do the same. We have to make changes to the dangerous proposals in this Bill.

Free Press is edited by Granville Williams for the National Council

**JOIN**  
**THE CAMPAIGN**  
**FOR PRESS AND**  
**BROADCASTING**  
**FREEDOM**

CPBF web site: [www.cpbp.org.uk](http://www.cpbp.org.uk)  
Email address: [freepress@cpbf.org.uk](mailto:freepress@cpbf.org.uk)

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b) Unwaged	£6
d) Supporting membership (includes free CPBF publications)	£25
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f) Fewer than 500 members	£25
g) 500 to 1,000	£30
h) 1,000 to 10,000	£50
i) 10,000 to 50,000	£115
j) 50,000 to 100,000	£225
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