

WAR SPIN

BY GRANVILLE WILLIAMS

WARS, certainly since the US involvement in Vietnam, have to be fought on two fronts: on the battlefield, and in the media to build public support for government action. What is striking about the situation in the USA is that, in spite of a sustained spin offensive, with heavy emphasis on 'the war on terror', 'the axis of evil' and so on, there is still a substantial majority of people who do not believe the case has been made for war with Iraq.

Reports of the marches in the USA on Saturday 17 January revealed a cross-section of American society involved in them. Adverts paid for by

an anti-war coalition appeared on network television, and a PEW Research Centre survey found that only 29% of US people supported an invasion. This is all the more surprising when one considers the right-wing radio talk shows, the thinly disguised conservative agenda of Rupert Murdoch's Fox News, and the largely uncritical coverage in the press and on the rest of network TV of Bush's war plans.

One reason for the resilience is the role of the net as an alternative source of information and to mobilise support. Another is the active participation of a wide range of religious, civil and trade union organisations.

In both in the USA and UK there was an intensification of war spin around the crucial dates in late January of the UN weapons inspector's report, Bush's address to Congress and a meeting between the US president and Tony Blair the day after. UK editors, leader writers and political reporters on almost every daily paper and in the broadcast media are being briefed regularly by Downing Street or the Foreign Office to get them on message. Of course, some like the Daily Mirror still maintain a critical perspective, as a recent front cover vividly demonstrated (see page 3).

As always, Free Press urges its readers to check out alternative sources, be critical about media coverage, and when necessary, challenge blatant media bias.

Useful alternative sources are:

www.opendemocracy.net;

www.fair.org; www.mwaw.org;

and www.medialens.org.

Hard pounding for the BBC

THE GOVERNMENT plans to set up an independent inquiry into the role and scale of the BBC before the corporation is awarded a new royal charter in 2006. Tessa Jowell, the Culture Secretary, said: 'It gives us the chance to ask whether the BBC can continue to be the driving force behind public-service broadcasting; to ask what shape the BBC should be; to ask how it should be accountable to its audiences.'

This might seem like a reasonable step for the minister to take, but there is going to be a massive struggle over the next three years, and it will be one around different aspects of the BBC's provision, challenging the right for each one of them to exist as a BBC service.

We have already had some insights into the kind of battles which will be re-fought again during the inquiry:

- the BBC's decision to launch two digital channels for children was

fiercely contested by media groups like Disney and Viacom because it would eat into their market.

- BBC News 24 has been attacked by Sky News because the licence fee meant that there was unfair competition between the two services

- The BBC's plans to divert £150m of licence fee money into the development of a new interactive learning platform was fiercely challenged by the Digital Learning Alliance, a consortium of commercial education software providers opposed to the BBC involvement in the digital curriculum

- BBC Online has also been challenged by the Association of Online Publishers who argue that because the BBC spend £115m on its internet and interactive television services it is unfairly taking traffic away from commercial sites.

- And there is the question of the licence fee, currently £112. Mersey

Television's Phil Redmond calls it a 'cultural poll tax' and Jonathan Miller, Sunday Times writer and ex-Sky PR publicist sees it as a violation of his human rights.

It is clear that the battle lines will be drawn around a very simple proposition. Should the BBC remain the sole beneficiary of the licence fee, or should the revenue from the licence be available for programmes which can prove a public service outcome? Discovery Channel could argue that its documentary programmes fulfil a public service remit; Pearson Education could provide educational programmes under the same criteria, and so on.

Hot on the heels of the controversial proposals in the Communications Bill which will have an enormous impact on public service broadcasting, another struggle is looming. Hard pounding, indeed, for the BEEB.

THE SHAYLER TRIAL

Annie Machon on a media stitch-up

IN NOVEMBER last year I witnessed one of the worst media stitch-ups in recent times. The London press has helped ministers, many of whom voted against the Official Secrets Act (OSA) when it was passed in 1989, to persecute, convict and imprison MI5 whistleblower, David Shayler, with barely a murmur.

From the start, the government focussed on traducing David's character to divert attention not only from his allegations but also from Tony Blair's failure to even hear what David had to say. In case we forget, this includes MI5 files on government ministers, MI5 failing to stop IRA bombs going off in the UK, the wrongful conviction of two innocent Palestinians for the Israeli embassy bombing in London in 1994, and an illegal phone tap on a Guardian journalist.

Most heinous of all was the fact that in 1995 two MI6 officers gave £100,000 of taxpayers' money to extremists linked to Al Qaeda to assassinate Colonel Gadaffi of Libya. The attack went wrong, killing innocent civilians. Malcolm Rifkind, the Foreign Secretary of the day, did not sanction the assassination attempt, making it a crime under the 1994 Intelligence Services Act. It also meant that shadowy MI6 officers were deciding British foreign policy, not our elected ministers.

So did our fearless national media call for the intelligence services to be held to account? No. Instead craven editors of national newspapers—who were only too ready to enjoy the front-page stories David provided—have left him to face the consequences of whistleblowing alone.

After surviving three years of exile, he returned to the UK voluntarily in August 2000. He then had to wait over two years for trial. After conviction, he spent three weeks locked up for 23 or 24 hours a day in an overcrowded 12' x 8' cell in HMP Belmarsh before being transferred to HMP Ford. He had already served

nearly four months in prison in Paris, awaiting an unsuccessful extradition attempt.

At trial, the government felt that the risk of embarrassment loomed large. The Home Secretary, David Blunkett, and the Foreign Secretary, Jack Straw, therefore signed Public Interest Immunity certificates (PIIs), 'gagging orders', against David to prevent him from saying anything in open court. The judge, Mr Justice Moses of Matrix Churchill fame, acceded to these without a blush, and then imposed reporting restrictions on the proceedings.

Even though David had to conduct his own defence in the courtroom, the judge and the prosecution censored any questions he needed to put to anonymous MI5 witnesses. David was also prevented from explaining why he had gone to the press.

Despite David going into this trial with both hands tied behind his back, and despite the judge ordering the jury to convict, it still took a group of twelve randomly chosen people more than three hours to convict David. When they did so, some of the jurors were in tears.

Although the courtroom was packed with journalists, the media wilfully ignored the facts of the case. The documents alleged by the prosecution to contain 'agent information' were just that—information gathered from agents and summarised for general government consumption. In fact, in summing up and sentencing, Mr Justice Moses made no reference to agent lives being put at risk.

He also made it abundantly clear that he accepted that David was not motivated by money; and that David believed he was acting in the public interest (even though the law did not allow such a defence in this case). That is why the judge gave him the relatively light sentence of six months. Had David been a traitor, as sections of the media trumpeted, he would have been tried under Section 1 of the 1911 OSA and received a



Photo by Molly Cooper

Annie and David arriving at the Old Bailey

fourteen year sentence.

A whistleblower does not operate in a vacuum. Journalists play an important role in airing these subjects in our 'free' press. In journalistic parlance, David Shayler has been a fantastically valuable source for over five years. This has not been reflected in his treatment. With a few extremely honourable exceptions, most hacks were merely interested in leeching David of information rather than protecting a man who risked everything to expose murder, terrorist funding and incompetence on the part of the intelligence services.

The truth is frightening. Editors, MPs and ministers are scared of the shadowy people who really run this country: the intelligence services. By not holding the services to account, the government and media is letting them get away, literally, with murder.

MI6: ANOTHER FINE MESS

MI6 was embarrassed in mid-January by its role in the collapse of a trial into money laundering on the Caymans. An MI6 operative, identified only as 'John Doe' was forced to admit MI6's role in the destruction of evidence that connected the organisation to the investigation of Euro Bank Corporation.

The judge ruled that the case against the Euro Bank defendants in the money laundering trial was fatally flawed because of MI6's interference with the evidence, and he pointed to the clash between the James Bond ethos which influenced MI6, and the rules of the courts.

JOHNSTON PRESS AND THE YORKSHIRE POST

THE AD in Press Gazette for a new editor of the Yorkshire Post had the headline 'Only 10 people have edited the Yorkshire Post since 1866'. But the background to the reason why the incumbent, Tony Watson, departed at the end of November last year, after editing the paper since 1989, is worth exploring. After all, the YP was named as Regional Newspaper of the Year in 2002 under his editorship.

One reason could be the fact that the YP acquired a new owner, Johnston Press, in April last year. The company has a reputation for being a management machine driven by the need to hit financial targets to satisfy City expectations. Newspapers just happen to be the means by which they deliver the profits. The result is the space for editors to carve out their own ideas and development plans for a paper are limited. Certainly this was the case with Yorkshire Post Newspapers. When Johnston acquired the titles they justified the price paid by saying they could make £9m savings. Maybe it was unhappiness with how those savings were to be made that precipitated Tony Watson's departure?

One incident illustrates the way the new regime works. Watson's response to 11 September was to send a journalist and photographer over to cover the aftermath. The coverage won praise, and Watson planned to do the same on the anniversary, but he was blocked by the new Johnston regime. Even when he got free flights and hotel accommodation lined up, he was still blocked.

It appears that he was the fifth director to depart since the take-over in April last year.

Proof, if it was needed, for the view of another victim of Johnston's management style, who said, 'They like managers who obey centralised edicts, and don't like opinionated journalists who resist their economies.'

THE SUN'S NEW EDITOR

THERE must have been as many column inches on the startling news that Rebekah Wade was the new editor on Britain's best selling red top

as on the threat of war with Iraq. Speculation that page 3 might go was quickly dropped. It will be there from Monday to Friday, with raunchy pics of soap and pop stars on Saturday.

But this is the froth on the top. What is the real significance of David Yelland's departure to hone his business skills? It is tempting to speculate that he didn't take into account the global interests of Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation. Others have fallen from grace for this error. Andrew Neil, as editor of the Sunday Times, used the paper to campaign against the construction of the Pergau Dam. Unfortunately this ruffled the feathers of politicians Murdoch was doing business with in Malaysia, and out went Neil from the editor's job.

David Yelland took a strong line in the Sun over whether English cricketers should play in the World Cup fixtures in Zimbabwe in February. An impassioned leader said: 'The issue is simple. Zimbabwe is a tortured and miserable land ruled by a tyrant. Playing international cricket there will create the impression that things can't be that bad after all.'

Good stuff, but Rupert Murdoch owns the world-wide television rights to the cricket World Cup, so maybe Yelland went a step too far for Rupert by not being aware of the impact of such comments on his wider commercial operations.

No problem with Rebekah on this. Her clear loyalty to whatever Rupert's views are will have been an absolute precondition for the job. One sign of this is a shift from being a cheerleader for Tony Blair (except on the Euro) since 1997, towards a more selective support. The war with Iraq is fine but on domestic issues the Sun is flexing its critical muscles and rather like the Sun editorial after the Major government's Black Wednesday debacle

(What Fools We Were, it angrily said, to advise you to vote for the Tories) maybe we are witnessing an important new political redirection of Murdoch's media power in the UK.

TOUGH AT THE TOP

IT WAS a bit rich when the Daily Mail launched an attack on the FBU leader, Andy Gilchrist, over his salary. We now have the details of Paul Dacre's pay for the last twelve months. As editor-in-chief of the Daily Mail, Evening Standard and Mail on Sunday Dacre was paid £834,000 last year.

The package breaks down into £760,000 salary and fees; £74,000 in benefits, including accommodation in central London; and a top up in his pension fund with a further £47,000 to £401,000.

When Paul Foot used his Guardian column to attack the disparity between Andy Gilchrist's pay and Paul Dacre's, it appears the Mail's editor-in-chief put five reporters on to combing through Paul Foot's life to dig up some dirt on him.



The front page of the Daily Mirror 6 January 2003. The Independent on Sunday is also coming out strongly against a war with Iraq. Robert Fisk had two very strong pieces in the 19 January issue which are worth reading.

GATS—TODAY'S LEGALISED PIRACY

JULIAN PETLEY ON THE GATS THREAT

IN OCTOBER the government announced a consultation document entitled Liberalising Trade in Services: a New Consultation on the World Trade Organisation GATS Negotiations. Never heard of GATS? You're not alone. Thanks to virtually no discussion of it in parliament and, until recently, absolutely minimal media coverage, 88% of the British population are in the same state of blissful ignorance, according to the Observer. And yet this is a measure which could, if unchecked, not only further pauperise the poorest countries of the world, but also, in the 'developing' and developed worlds alike, could cause to be rendered illegal vast swathes of public provision and national and local government regulation thanks to rules devised and enforced by an entirely unelected and unaccountable body - the World Trade Organisation (WTO).

During the 1980s the increasing economic importance of the provision of services led the ever more powerful service companies of the industrialised countries to agitate for virtually unlimited market access on a global scale. Western governments and the European Commission needed no encouragement to help big business embark on this latest rapacious adventure, and together they set about designing - extremely secretly - an international agreement aimed at 'liberalising' the global trade in services. The result, in 1995, was the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS), which is overseen by the WTO.

The service industries now account for about

WITHOUT COMMENT

“Any American president building support for trade must overcome protectionists, special interests, anti-globalisation nihilists and partisanship against the president... We will not passively accept a veto over America's drive to open markets. We want to encourage reformers who favour free trade. If others do not want to move forward, the United States will move ahead with those who do 'Unleashing the trade winds.'”

The Economist, December 7, 2002 by Robert Zoellick, (United States Trade Representative and a member of the Bush cabinet).

two thirds of economic activity in industrialised countries, half of economic activity in 'developing' countries and over half the world's total economy. In all economies, service activities soak up 60% of all foreign direct investment, of which 90% is from developed countries. Service provision covers a truly vast spectrum of activity, from education to tourism, banking to rubbish collection, health care to communication. At the turn of the millennium, global trade in services was worth \$1,35 trillion, but this still accounted for only about 20% of total global trade. Clearly, then, there's tremendous scope for expansion here, and the financial benefits to western service providers of seeing developing countries stripped of the ability to regulate or otherwise intervene in their own service sectors, especially where those services are provided by foreign multinationals, are all too glaringly obvious.

As with other WTO agreements, the purpose of GATS is 'liberalisation', or de-regulation. Its basic aim is to increase global trade in services by removing 'unnecessary' restrictions and governmental regulations that are deemed to be 'barriers' to trade between countries. The Articles of the agreement, which are basically a list of ways in which governments should not 'interfere' in the market, are seen by the WTO as essentially the first ever set of global, legally enforceable rules covering the international trade in services. As Renato Ruggiero, the former WTO Director General put it in 1998, the GATS extends the WTO's jurisdiction into 'areas never before recognised as trade policy'. And how.

The driving concept of GATS is that individual countries make 'commitments' to open up particular parts of their economies to trade under GATS. Its key principle include:

- Most favoured nation (MFN). Each WTO member must treat the import of services from all other members no less favourably than for any other member.
- National treatment. Each member must treat foreign service suppliers no less favourably than its own service suppliers.
- Transparency. Members must make all regulations affecting trade in services known and accessible and administrative decisions open to appeal. In order to avoid what it euphemistically calls 'disguised protectionism', regulations must not be 'more burdensome than necessary to ensure the quality of the service'.
- Progressive liberalisation. Members shall enter into rounds of negotiations aimed at achieving

progressively higher levels of trade liberalisation.

- The ratchet effect. Once a commitment has been made it will be virtually impossible to withdraw it.
- Market access. This rules out limits on the number of service suppliers in a sector, on the size of the market and on the type of legal entity allowed to provide a service.

The GATS process thus far has followed what is called a 'request-offer' approach. That is, each country has 'requested' from other countries the sectors it wants them to liberalise (the deadline for this was 30 June 2002) and then each country has 'offered' the sectors it is willing to liberalise (deadline March 2003). After this the full negotiations start, first bilateral then multilateral, and will last until the end of 2004. In effect, this will be a complex series of trade-offs, during the course of which powerful countries will twist the arms of weaker ones and offer them all sorts of dubious 'inducements' to trade away their services - including persuading 'developing' countries to give GATS commitments in return for rich countries actually keeping promises which they made years ago in other areas.

At first, GATS appeared to be an issue primarily for those concerned with the ravages of globalisation, and specifically with the developed world's conglomerates effectively re-colonising the 'developing' one. Now, however, as western countries' 'offers' are gradually being dragged into the light by the efforts of assiduous NGOs such as the World Development Movement (WDM), we can see that our own services are under threat too. Nowhere is this a more serious threat than in the UK, in which, thanks to successive government policies, the private sector already plays a key role in the provision of public services; it therefore becomes much more difficult than in other EU countries to 'ring fence' them from GATS-inspired demands that they should be fully opened up to competition, since they've already been effectively 'liberalised'. It's also particularly alarming that, in this country, GATS negotiations are in the hands of the high priests of neo-liberal fundamentalism, the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI).

Thus we now discover that, with almost no public debate at all, the UK has already made commitments in certain areas of health, retail distribution, education, tourism, the environment, business services, telecommunications, and financial services, although precisely what these are the DTI chooses not to reveal. There are,

however, other parts of the education, health and the environment sectors in which, apparently, no commitments have yet been made, and none have been given thus far in the energy, postal and audio-visual communications sectors. On the other hand, numerous requests have already been received and more are likely to follow. In particular, the audio-visual communications sector looks extremely vulnerable.

Here, on the one hand, the DTI's hands are to some extent tied by the Television Without Frontiers Directive and the European Convention on Transfrontier Television, both of which are designed to carve out a protected space for European productions on European television stations, although the former was fatally weakened at birth by British efforts essentially to exempt Murdoch's Sky from its requirements. Britain is also a member of the Media Plus programme, which helps in particular to support European film industries. However, there is still plenty of scope for GATS to wreak havoc with our broadcasting system.

In this sector, again, competition with the main public service provider, the BBC, already exists: regulated in the case of Channels 3, 4 and 5, and largely unregulated—thanks to the complicity of successive governments—in the case of BSkyB. Furthermore, the current Communications Bill has made all too clear the government's absolute determination to 'liberalise' current media ownership rules, even in the face of concerted opposition from across the political spectrum, and, in the words of the consultation document, 'to overhaul and simplify the legal framework for the media industry'. So, even if the Government were defeated over its proposals to open up large parts of British television to non-EU ownership, it could simply reintroduce them by the back door under the GATS rules. That's what I call neat.

However, the government may feel rather less smug when voters realise that these rules could effectively abolish the BBC and render totally illegal the public service obligations of Channels 3, 4 and 5. How so? Well, the consultation document reveals that, in the audio-visual sector, the government has received requests to 'remove discriminatory subsidies', words which could have been written by Murdoch himself—or, more likely, his sinister henchman and tireless lobbyist in Westminster and Brussels, Irwin Stelzer—as part of News International's shrill and seemingly indefatigable propaganda campaign against the

BBC licence fee. Furthermore, the aforementioned requirement that all types of regulation should be the 'least burdensome' could easily be brought into play by a Channel 3, 4, or 5 owned by, say, Disney or AOL which felt itself unduly constrained by the public service broadcasting requirements laid upon it by OFCOM, especially if it felt that these were limiting its profitability in the new hyper-competitive environment promised by the Communications Bill. Why should a vast multinational company bother with what OFCOM says when it knows that its next stop will be the WTO, the ne plus ultra of deregulation?

GATS represents capitalism's ultimate wet dream: the commodification of absolutely everything on the planet, including its water supplies. Alarmist nonsense? Maybe, maybe not, but thanks to the shroud of secrecy surrounding GATS it's really quite impossible to judge. However, the very fact that this messianic project has been hatched in the dark clearly suggests that its creators realise that what they regard as a free market utopia is likely to be perceived as hell on earth by most of the rest of the world's population—once it discovers what's in store, that is. Thus the most urgent task of the moment is to flush the terms of these shady and thoroughly sinister deals out into the open before they can be concluded, and to persuade enough of the world's 'developing' countries to recognise the whole GATS process for the act of legalised piracy that it is, and to withdraw from it forthwith, thus causing it effectively to collapse.

For a comprehensive guide to GATS visit the World Development Movement website: www.wdm.org.uk

COMMUNICATIONS BILL LOBBY & MEETING

Tuesday 11 February 2003
from 2 to 6pm

(meet at the St Stephens entrance to Parliament)

Meeting with MPs, Lords, union
and industry speakers, including:

Lord David Puttnam film producer, chair
of joint Parliamentary Committee on the
Communications Bill

Nick Jones former BBC political
correspondent

John Grogan MP Labour backbencher and
leading critic of the Bill

Jeremy Dear NUJ General Secretary

NUJ briefing notes available on the day.

OFCOM & Press regulation

BY TOM O'MALLEY

AT THE end of 2002 the Liberal Democrats in the House of Lords signalled that they intended to put an amendment to the 2002/3 Communications Bill, which would bring the regulation of press standards under the supervision of the new media regulator, the Office of Communications (OFCOM).

This offers a welcome opportunity to scrutinise the newspaper proprietors' Press Complaints Commission. But would placing press regulation under OFCOM be an advance on the present situation?

It is now fifty years since the Press Council (1953-1990) was established. Its successor the Press Complaints Commission has presided over the same territory. The system has made sure that 70-80% or more of public complaints never reach adjudication. These two bodies have never had the power to make their judgements stick. They have both acted as lightning conductors, taking the strain when press behaviour has provoked the public and politicians to despair.

They have been sustained by politicians who lack the political courage to take action, even though alternative

models have been around for years. These issues have been documented repeatedly since the 1950s, most recently, and unwittingly, in the PCC's official history*.

The Communications Bill states that OFCOM is meant to primarily promote economic competition in the media. It is designed to allow as much self regulation by the media as possible. Why? Because positive regulation costs the industry money! OFCOM is run by a small Board which represents no one. There is less representation for Wales and Scotland on OFCOM than there was on the former regulators.

To place press regulation under OFCOM would be to move responsibility from an employer-owned body to an employer orientated body, dominated by the neo liberal economic orthodoxy so beloved of our rulers. No change there, and little improvement likely in press regulation!

A radically restructured OFCOM, designed to promote the public interest, run by an elected Board with a remit to be accountable to the public would be another matter. But the Labour government is not in favour of such a dangerously democratic development, and has said as much.

Even if OFCOM was a better regulator we would still need legislation designed to separate media standards issues from the provision of services. Otherwise, as is the case with the PCC, the result is a body which simply enforces the will of the providers.

We need separate legislation. A statutory right of reply to factual inaccuracies should be supervised by an elected body made up of members of the public and workers in the industry. A Press Freedom Law, enshrining rights for the public and journalists, as against the privileges of government and big business would be an essential feature of such a settlement.

Although the Liberal Democrats are right to raise this issue, the goal of improving press standards, journalists' rights and the public right to accuracy in the media, will certainly not be achieved if regulation is handed over to the OFCOM created in the Communications Bill.

* Geoffrey Robertson, *The People against the Press* (1983); C.Soley and T.O'Malley, *Regulating the Press* (2000); and R. Shannon, *A Press Free and Responsible* (2001).

publisher's book on the early days of Forza Italia has received eight demands for damages.

Media power (2)

PRESIDENT HUGO Chavez in Venezuela has threatened to revoke the broadcasting licences of private TV and radio stations. This is in response to the open support of the private media for the opposition's sabotage of the economy and attempts to overthrow the democratically elected government.

Private TV stations have replaced commercials with constant messages from the opposition. The stations give blanket coverage to anti-Chavez demonstrations while ignoring much larger pro-Chavez demonstrations. The owners of the private media also supported, and were implicated in the failed military coup in April last year.

Our Media, Not Theirs Robert W. McChesney and John Nichols Seven Stories Press £7.99

RECENTLY the US Supreme Court decided that it was not going to restrict Congress's decision to extend copyright periods. The case was a legal challenge to the 1998 Copyright Extension Act, which extended the period of copyright protection for another 20 years.

The Act resulted from lobbying by Disney and other movie studios to prevent their early films coming into the public domain.


The Federal Communications Commission is now deciding on further liberalisation of media ownership rules so that previous restrictions to ownership of television stations and newspapers in the same locality are likely to be jettisoned. Again, this is the result of systematic lobbying by the media companies.

It is examples like this Bob McChesney and John Nichols have in mind when they ask us to 'Consider how powerful the media and communications lobbies are in Washington, DC, as they routinely use the campaign contribution scalpel to remove politicians' backbones'.

This is an angry and impassioned book, which documents the malign influence of the corporate media on American society. It is a revised and updated version of *It's The Media, Stupid* published in 2000 in the excellent Open Media Book series by Seven Stories Press. The horror stories are all here the massive boost in media concentration following the 1996

CPBF & Leeds NUJ - PUBLIC MEETING

Nick Jones on



Wednesday 5 March 7.30pm
Albert Room, Leeds Town Hall

Nick Jones, author of *Soundbites & Spin Doctors* and *The Control Freaks*. He has worked on *The Times* and for BBC radio & TV as a Labour Correspondent and Political Reporter.

“What is the point of government? You will be pleased to know I don't intend to hold a symposium on the subject, but one not bad answer is this: promote competition where we can and regulate if we have to, to protect the public, and the consumer”

TISSA JOWELL IPPR CONVENTION ON PUBLIC SERVICE COMMUNICATIONS, OXFORD 15 JANUARY 2003



Photo Duncan Phillips/Reportdigital

Telecommunications Act is illustrated by examples like Clear Channel which now owns 1,200 stations; the supine and uncritical character of corporate media over the 2000 Presidential election results, and so on.

However the authors' purpose 'is not to wallow in how bad things are getting, but to begin to reverse the trend with workable strategies for activism, organising and direct action.' Whilst the bulk of the book's content concentrates on the US experience, it is very relevant for media reform movements elsewhere. In particular, for the UK there is the threat posed in the Communications Bill for an increased power and dominance of US corporate media in our broadcasting system. Read this book and be warned.

MEDIA ACTIVISM CONTINUES

IN FP131 we gave examples of the way media activists in the USA have challenged selective or inaccurate reporting. Here is another success.

A drama on HBO that purports to tell the true story of a cable crew broadcasting during the Gulf War presents uncritical treatment of an old charge that in 1990 Iraqi soldiers threw Kuwaiti babies out of incubators.

Live from Baghdad, made by HBO, is based on a memoir by Robert Weiner on how CNN covered the Gulf War. He was a field producer at the time. Halfway through the film, a CNN anchor informs viewers about allegations of brutality and then shifts to a tearful woman declaring, 'They took the babies out of the incubators, took the incubators and left the babies to die on the cold floor!'

It was a lie, propagated by the international PR firm Hill and Knowlton, who received \$10.7m from the Kuwaiti government for this and other services. The story was used by the Americans at the UN Security

Council, and by George Bush in a January 1991 speech before he ordered the bombing of Iraq.

A FAIR activism campaign led HBO to include a message at the end of the credits which reads: 'While the allegations of Iraqi soldiers taking babies from incubators were widely circulated during the run-up to the Gulf War (the time frame of the drama of our film) these allegations were never substantiated.'

On the HBO website there is a piece by John R. MacArthur which sheds considerable light on the incubators hoax. (MacArthur is also the author of an excellent book: *Second Front: Censorship and Propaganda in the Gulf War*).

FRIES HAVE HAD THEIR CHIPS

CONFUSED about some stories in the media identifying concerns about the impact on English if there is a major expansion of US media ownership in the UK? Their origin came from an initiative by Paul Reese who has volunteered his services to raise the media profile on the Bill.

He thought one angle could be that American English words could substitute for English. Of course we all know that a living language changes, absorbs words from other languages, and creates new words. But we thought there were important links to be made between programmes made in the UK, reflecting the experiences, language, culture, accents, and so on, and the possible threat of ITV or commercial radio carrying more US material through changes in media ownership.

Well the idea worked. It led to a story in the Independent on Sunday, an interview on a New York PBS radio programme on the media, and other media items on Radios 4 and 5. It was an intriguing insight into the how someone skilled in the cunning arts of PR can generate news stories.

Media power (1)

DISTURBING news from Italy on a number of fronts as the uneasy relationship between Berlusconi's media and political power is again threatening freedom of expression. When Berlusconi presented his political programme two years ago he said, 'Our children must no longer study history books with Marxist deviations.' Now the Forza Italia MP Fabio Garagnani has drawn up a 36-page dossier on supposed left-wing bias in textbooks.

The parliamentary Culture committee passed a motion in December inviting the education ministry to ensure that textbooks were scientifically rigorous and objective. What the intention seems to be is to stiffen the criticism of communism, go a bit easier on fascism and refrain from attacking

Silvio Berlusconi.

A new book by Tobias Jones, *The Dark Heart of Italy*, points to the insidious power Berlusconi has: 'It's impossible to move without inadvertently coming up against his influence. If you watch football matches, or television, try to buy a house, or a book, or a newspaper, rent a video or else shop in a supermarket, the chance are you're somehow filling the coffers of Il Cavaliere (last estimated to be worth \$14 billion).'

In Italy Berlusconi also relies on the chilling effect of libel. The Economist, just before the 2001 Italian election, printed details of all the allegations of corruption against Berlusconi and urged Italians not to support him. Berlusconi sued in the Italian courts and the case is still to be heard. In Italy broadcasters and publishers not owned by him are bombarded with threats of damages. A small left

CPBF NEWS

Action round-up

TOM O'MALLEY & BARRY WHITE

AS THE Communications Bill proceeds through the House of Commons the government has shown no sign of introducing key safeguards. There still needs to be a firm obligation on the part of OFCOM to make extending and enforcing public service principles in commercial broadcasting the priority. There still needs to be a change to the Bill to enforce an obligation for the main operators to sustain and develop strong production centres in places like Wales. There needs to be an intervention to stop the foolish relaxation of media ownership rules that will lead to the media in Wales being dominated by companies with no discernible commitment to the nation. And the government needs to drop its contempt for representative democracy, and allow a democratically appointed member of the OFCOM board to come from Wales.

In Wales the media trade unions and the Campaign plan a briefing of all Welsh MPs on 12 February. This is in part to alert many of them to the

serious implications for Wales of the provisions in the Bill, and to urge them to intervene now, before it is too late, to achieve serious reforms of the legislation. If you live in Wales, contact your MP now and ask them to attend the lobby. Full details will be posted to all Welsh MPs.

And in the rest of the UK? In Scotland campaigners around the Communications Bill are collecting signatures for a petition to be presented to the Parliament in Edinburgh towards the end of February.

While on 20 January in London, trade union leaders, MPs and Lords (including Lord Puttnam and members of his joint committee which scrutinised the draft communications bill) dined together to discuss tactics. The NUJ and Bectu sponsored the event.

On Tuesday 11 February, there will be a lobby of Parliament and meeting with MPs, Lords, union and industry speakers. This has been organised by the NUJ. Please get there if you can, (details page 5)

Keep it coming please

GEOFF MASON, National Treasurer.

LAST year we raised over £14,500 in donations. Much resulted from the appeal we launched in the spring. We had a welcome burst of contributions in the last couple of months including one generous personal donation of £700. As the Communications Bill enters the Lords in the next few weeks, we need to step up our publicity, lobbying and campaigning work. So we are pressing on with our appeal to raise the full £20,000 we set ourselves.

Every donation is important and welcome. Another way of helping is to recruit a friend or colleague to the CPBF. The last few weeks has seen a steady trickle of new members. Membership subscriptions are our life blood—so please do all you can.

Frank Allaun

We planned to put an obituary for Frank in this issue. Space has prevented us from doing this, but we will be putting it in the next issue. He was a strong supporter of the CPBF.

Free Press is edited by Granville Williams for the National Council

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