

EDITORIAL

THE assault on the BBC comes from two sources: Downing Street and sections of the press, notably Rupert Murdoch's News International titles, *The Sun* and *The Times*.

These papers chose to target the BBC, *The Times* suggesting in a leader, 'Reithian Values?' on 22 July that Lord Hutton must expose the faultlines in our institutions'. The front page in the same edition had the main story, 'First cracks in unity of BBC board' citing two unnamed governors who were concerned about the issues surrounding BBC reporting, and the handling of news that Dr Kelly was the source.

It was pretty poor reporting, and the BBC quickly rebutted the claims it made.

Of course the assault on the BBC is nothing new. Attacks on it began to appear regularly in the Murdoch press from the mid-1980s on, and to the extent that the public service broadcaster can be damaged in the run-up to the Charter review in 2006, the media interests of News International benefit.

As we went to press the onslaught by the Downing Street spin machine was moving up a gear with the deployment of Peter Mandelson to lead the attack on the BBC.

It is vital that the Hutton inquiry establishes clearly the sequence of events, and who was responsible for the pressures which led to Dr Kelly's death. But we also need to remember that this sad incident has already done what Downing Street wanted, albeit without the unforeseen consequences of his death. Since Alastair Campbell began the attacks on Andrew Gilligan's reporting, the focus of media attention has moved away from the substantive issue of whether Blair misled the country into war through his endlessly repeated claims that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction ready to use.

The events bear all the telltale signs of a deliberate, diversionary manoeuvre. Bashing the BBC may produce dramatic headlines, but in the long run the tactic will damage Downing Street more.

Competitive pressures

NICHOLAS JONES
on the lessons for
BBC journalism



THE row over Andrew Gilligan's report accusing Downing Street of having 'sexed up' the intelligence assessment of the threat posed by Iraq's weapons of mass destruction was, in some respects, an accident waiting to happen. For me, it illustrated all too clearly, some of the potential pitfalls of the changing nature of BBC journalism.

In Britain's media-driven society, reporters are judged increasingly on their ability to deliver exclusive stories. These competitive pressures could and should not have been ignored by the BBC. By and large the Corporation's response over recent years has been admirable.

Programmes like *Today*, *World at One* and *Newsnight* have established formidable reputations for their independent and original reporting. Producers and correspondents have been encouraged to break stories in order to offer listeners and viewers distinctive and sometimes different accounts of the day's news.

A diversity of approach has undoubtedly been a tremendous strength. Nonetheless, looking back on my thirty years as a BBC correspondent, I would have to say that in my final decade this did result in a marked shift of power: control over the editorial agenda has moved progressively from newsrooms to the individual programmes.

Instead of BBC newsrooms imposing a standard line, the editors of each programme have been given the last word: they can decide what to headline and can also determine the content of any news bulletin which is incorporated within their output.

Inevitably this has intensified the

rivalry between competing strands: Today is keen to set the agenda, putting the *World At One* at a disadvantage; *Newsnight* is anxious to show it can outdo the *Ten O'clock News*.

One casualty of this push for a greater divergence in the way events are investigated and reported is that sometimes there can be impatience with the more cautious approach adopted by newsroom staff who are compiling news bulletins over a twenty-four hour period, not just for the short window of a particular programme.

Gilligan's solo operation for *Today* exemplified that free-wheeling approach, driven as it is by an insatiable demand for demand for exclusive, agenda-setting stories. In earlier years there would have been a greater degree of overall control; programme editors would have been told to share information.

We now know that three BBC correspondents—Gilligan, Susan Watts (*Newsnight*) and Gavin Hewitt (*Ten O'clock News*)—spoke to Dr David Kelly on separate occasions. The management has since taken pride in the fact that these reporters acted independently, each putting a different emphasis in how they reported their conversations.

In retrospect, it would obviously have been better if these three correspondents had worked together and pooled their knowledge; the resulting story would have far stronger and much more authoritative. After all the government was being accused of taking Britain into war on the basis of a lie.

Until the row over Gilligan's report, my concern was directed at the ease with which government spin doctors have been able to manipulate the competitive pressures which have been

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Commercial pressures on ITN

BRUCE WHITEHEAD

IN 1997, ITV won the contract to cover Formula One motor racing with a bid of £70m—ten times what the BBC had been paying. I worked as a journalist on ITN bulletins at the time and noticed a sharp increase in the number of news stories we carried about motor racing. Even on practice day, usually a Saturday, we would faithfully compile a report about how some German or Brazilian had been fastest. Once, when England won a test match, we still led the sports section of the news with a report about Michael Schumacher winning a grand prix!

If the two developments were linked, that would clearly be an unacceptable blurring of the lines between commercial interests and news impartiality. The impression might have been given that Formula One advertisers were now getting their brands all over the news as well. The news agenda should clearly not be determined in this way. Yet this was not the first time I noticed such a blurring of the lines. When I joined ITN in 1994, I wrote a script for a story about Nigerian human rights abuses being carried out on behalf of Shell, a big oil producer there. I obtained pictures from an impeccable source, a Channel Four documentary maker, who even let me use them BEFORE they had been broadcast on the acclaimed *Critical Eye* strand. But ITN said no. The exact words of my editor were: 'We couldn't possibly run that story. Shell might sue us.' It was only later that I discovered, in an investigation by George Monbiot, that Shell was a client of CTN, the commercial offshoot of ITN which makes videos. Posing as an arms dealer, he asked CTN about getting some videos made to smarten up his company's image. Monbiot says he was offered access to ITN journalists, briefings and help with getting his message across. After the story appeared in *The Journalist*, ITN rapidly hived off CTN to keep a more respectable distance from the temptation of commercial interests.

However, the relentless hyping of showbiz, crime and sports news continued apace during the nineties, as the ITN flagship *News at Ten* gave way to movies and lost its top place in British households as the most credible and trustworthy of news broadcasts. The goal of highly-paid management was to deliver ratings—commercial interests, not journalism, had won the day. There were bonuses and huge salaries all round.

During all of these developments, Richard Tait was in a senior position at ITN, finally retiring as Editor-in-Chief last year. He recently addressed a London seminar about bias in news, insisting that the importance of separating news from commercial interests was paramount. When I put the above points to him, instead of answering my questions, he began to hint to the audience of media professionals that I somehow held a grudge, and had left ITN in, as he put it, 'unhappy circumstances.' In fact ITN had paid me a substantial 'golden parachute' as I accepted a valued promotion at CNN.

The fact that Richard was so reluctant to address any of these issues is very worrying. Could it be that ITN's recent management had something to hide? If that is the case, one must hope that the new guard will try to restore the reputation for quality news journalism that the broadcaster has lost. In particular they must resist any move by the government in redrafting communications legislation to allow ITV to have any further control over its news provider, as demanded by Lord Bragg. Whatever assurances ITV chiefs might give about keeping their hands off the news, the temptation to let the commercial interests of an ad-funded channel interfere with an independent news agenda is too strong. ITN must remain independent, and ITV should be obliged to pay sufficiently for it to maintain effective competition and diversity in the face of the BBC's formidable news machine.

BRUCE WHITEHEAD is a freelance journalist and a member of the CPBF

Television impartiality or biased news?

NICHOLAS JONES

on a topical and important debate

Two of Britain's leading thinkers in the development of television news went head-to-head in a debate over demands that the rules on impartiality should be relaxed so as to allow broadcast journalism to become biased and opinionated. Chris Shaw, Channel 5's controller of news and current affairs, argued for a loosening in the regulations, claiming that 'news with a slant' would create real diversity. Richard Tait, ITN's former editor-in-chief, warned of the danger of allowing broadcasting in Britain to go down the American route. He feared that if Channel 5 was able to ape Rupert Murdoch's Fox News Channel then the public's high level of trust in broadcasters would plummet.

The debate, organised by the CPBF, was held at the headquarters of the National Union of Journalists on 23 June. It could hardly have been more topical: the Independent Television Commission had just given the pro-war Fox News the all-clear after British viewers complained about bias in its coverage of the conflict in Iraq. The ITC rejected nine complaints, saying that Fox News, which holds a British licence, had not breached the programme code on 'due impartiality' because the regulations did not require broadcasters to be 'absolutely neutral on every controversial issue.'

Chris Shaw welcomed the ruling, which he considered was as significant as the broadcasters' decision to abandon the previous out-dated practice of timing political interviews with a stop watch. 'News with a point of view is already here on British TV news with a slant, which falls short of the most exacting standards of due impartiality, is already alive, kicking and growing in the United Kingdom.' Shaw believed opinionated news would create real diversity and he longed for the day when he could find coverage on TV which 'chimed' with the kind of campaigns mounted by newspapers like the *Sun*, *Daily Mail* and *Daily Mirror*.

'Every news programme already comes with a ready-made set of

prejudices. It is the same on both BBC and ITN: a middle class, essentially liberal and English, but not British, point of view. Young people and ethnic groups are alienated by this, so are the not so well educated, the C2s and Es. They are the people who switch off TV news because the agenda, treatment, and prejudices do not chime with their attitude of what is important in their world.'

Richard Tait was convinced that the long-standing British tradition of fair and accurate television reporting, which had been enshrined in the 1990 Broadcasting Act and which imposed a legal obligation for 'due impartiality', had served the public well. He cited a recent opinion poll which had shown that 70% of people trusted television news whereas only 6% trusted newspapers. Tait feared what might happen in Britain if Channel 5 followed the example of Fox News which flew the US flag on screen and had sent a reporter to Iraq armed with a gun.

'News programming must be done

Freedom of Information Blocked

REMEMBER that speech Tony Blair made back in 1996 at the Freedom of Information awards about how Labour would make a clean break from Tory secrecy and sleaze? Well, Labour's flawed Freedom of Information act doesn't come into force until 2005, and until then John Major's 'open government' code, which the ombudsman, Ann Abraham, is responsible for policing, remains in force.

It appears she is threatening to quit over the difficulties placed in her way as she performs this role. Lord Falconer, the Lord Chancellor, and Douglas Alexander, the Minister of State at the Cabinet Office, have signed a certificate blocking disclosure of information. The furore blew up when *The Guardian* sought disclosure of all potential conflicts of interests facing ministers since 1999. Now this information has been denied because it would be 'prejudicial to the safety of the state or

in a framework which is impartial. If we make it bent we might as well give up.' Yet the framework which made Fox News possible in the US was already happening in the UK; soon there could be one ITV and it could be bought by one of the three or four big US companies and Channel 5 could be taken over by News Corporation. 'The fact that the ITC cleared Fox News shows the way things are going but if the regulator says small channels can be judged by different criteria then we have sold the principle of impartiality.'

Tait thought those arguing for a relaxation of the rules on impartiality were ignoring the fact that Britain had a media-literate society. 'People buying a newspaper understand that their paper is taking a view...but it is the BBC and ITN, which are way ahead of the press, which the public trust. That is a public good and if you give it up, you must have a good rationale as to what you will get in return.'

In winding up the debate the two speakers acknowledged that change

otherwise contrary to the public interest.'

Surely a cornerstone of open government should be that we know when ministers have personal, family or business connections which may conflict with their ministerial responsibilities? Blocking information only suggests there is something to hide.

Sorry, Jim

JIM BRENNAN has been a tireless commentator on the media for a number of years. Remember the *Media Reporter* which Jim produced from 1976 to 1985? His latest online venture is *Global Journalism Review*: www.globalreview.bt.internet.co.uk.

Well, it isn't quite his latest venture—he started it in May 1998. Over the years, Jim has sent a steady flow of information to the CPBF and we also have a link on his site, too. But there has never been a mention about his activities in *Free Press*. Sincere apologies for the oversight, Jim.

So, belatedly, we urge readers to visit his website where you can read his *Work in Progress*, which deals with his first experiences as a reporter

was inevitable. Tait appealed to Shaw to accept that the impartiality rules were proving to be quite flexible as it was. 'Before we smash up the regulations, beware of what might happen. My worry is that commercial interests will fill that gap and control more and more of the coverage. The notion that there might be dozens more news channels reflecting dozens of views is a fantasy. No one can launch a news channel without vast resources.'

Shaw conceded that in the 'raw jungle atmosphere' which might result if Channel 5 was taken over by Murdoch or an American company, then his channel might stop doing news altogether. 'But I don't think we can go on doing news on TV as we do it at the moment. Yes we have had a revolution of diversity in the appearance of TV news but not in the journalism, balance or impartiality. I am talking about information...about people engaging with information. I think the rules on 'due impartiality' are going to go anyway, so let's just rely on the laws of the land.'

on Fleet Street after the Second World War. There are also lots of links to other media organisations besides the CPBF.

Journalism Studies

ANOTHER publication readers might find interesting is the academic magazine, *Journalism Studies*. The latest issue, Vol 4 Number 3 August 2003, contains several pieces by names familiar to *Free Press* readers. The prolific Robert W. McChesney has a piece on the crisis in contemporary US journalism. Robert Hackett and Scott Uzelman have a piece on Corporate Influences on Press Content, which summarises recent Newswatch Canada research, and there are other informative pieces on Rupert Murdoch's reshaping of Australian politics in the late 1970s, and a defence of the 'propaganda model' of the media developed by Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky on *Manufacturing Consent*.

It is the sort of magazine that should be available in University libraries or you can visit the website of the publishers, Taylor and Francis, www.tandf.co.uk/journals.

At last year's AGM, as part of a discussion on the future of the CPBF, it was agreed that we should update and modify the original aims of the organisation. At this year's AGM the new aims were agreed. Tony Lennon's article was prompted by a discussion of one of the aims—the issue of open access to the media.

Access for all or access denied?



Tony Lennon ...

When the dotcom trading bubble finally burst in a shower of corporate bankruptcies, many of the visionary voices who had sold us the idea of a wired-up digital future were shamed into silence.

Almost overnight we stopped hearing about a brave new world that had once included teleworking, predicted to be an antidote to daily drudge for millions of workers, online shopping that should have tolled a death-knell for the super-market industry, and digital video-on-demand, which was meant to free a generation of TV couch potatoes from the tyranny of BBC and ITV schedulers choosing programmes for them.

As technology stock prices collapsed, and economic pundits hastily rediscovered the virtues of boring old-economy investments it looked like the developed world's high-tech overhaul had been halted by words borrowed from a previous revolution—No pasarán!

Anyone who doubted the flagging speed and scale of Britain's digital transformation was finally

convinced earlier this year when mobile telephone operators, who had spent more than £21bn buying the right to run third-generation (3G) services, began writing down the balance sheet value of their licences. More recently, an auction of UK telecoms licences for delivery of internet access to homes and businesses via satellite and microwave ended up with just one bidder buying nearly all the licences for £7m—an amount that would have been dismissed as loose change by the communications industry only a couple of years before.

Against this trend, the digital revolution has continued marching on in UK homes, albeit more slowly and quietly than at the height of the dotcom boom.

Over 6 million households now have digital satellite TV, and more than half our homes possess a personal computer—statistics that ought to give comfort to fans of the wired-up interactive world.

However, it looks clearer than ever that the benefits of the wired world are not going to be shared equally. Trends in two key technologies—digital TV and home access to online information—indicate that we are heading for a two-tier society. Fears of a 'digital divide' between rich and poor, a common theme in the heyday of dotcom evangelism, are coming back to haunt us with a vengeance, and the gap is beginning to look unbridgeable.

In February this year, personal computers were installed in 54% of UK homes. By 2007 this proportion is expected, on current trends, to creep up to 60%, but no further. This projection dovetails neatly with surveys which indicate that 40% of adults have never used the internet—ever.

Of course, this compares well with less-developed countries where computer screens are a luxury—more than half the world's population have not even used a telephone, never mind a PC. But in the UK, where the government has set a 2005

target to make all its services available online, people without easy access to a computer, and the training to use it, will face major obstacles. Even if the government is forced politically to stick with paper forms for a myriad of transactions from benefit claims to pension queries, many businesses are planning to press on with their drive towards the greater efficiency, and higher profits, achieved by favouring customers who can make purchases online.

Already, the UK has many successful online traders—from cut-price airlines to industrial component suppliers—all of whom charge extra to customers who don't buy through their websites, and in some cases simply refuse to accept orders by any other route.

For non-computerised homes, the difficulty of dealing with state bureaucracy and online shopping stores won't be the only problem in 2005. Information of all kinds is being migrated from the written form into online databanks so quickly that adults and children without easy access to the wired world are already seriously disadvantaged, both socially and educationally.

The digital divide between rich and poor is dramatic—only 20% of people in the UK earning less than £17,500 pa have access to the internet, either at work or home. Among those earning more than £30,000 the figure is 78%. With the best will in the world, this gap is unlikely to be filled by conscientious public libraries straining their budgets to add a few more public workstations, nor by the ephemeral internet cafes that seem to bloom and die on a weekly cycle on every high street.

When people who don't own home PCs are asked whether they will ever buy one, the most common reason given for staying out of the wired world is cost—not just the price of a computer, but the consequent charge from telephone providers for modem access to the internet once they get connected.

Broadband telecoms connections ought, in theory, to ease the cost of using the internet, since most packages on offer to private homes are sold at flat-rate prices, regardless of the time spent using online resources. For users who can afford the equipment needed to connect, and who live in urban centres where broadband is more likely to be available than in the countryside this might make sense.

Entry costs are high, though, and although the percentage of broadband homes in the UK is almost guaranteed to grow from the present 15%—one of the lowest in Europe—it could be decades before the technology is an option for the underprivileged.

Cost is also one of the main obstacles to take-up of digital TV, the second major source of entertainment and information.

More than 10m homes now receive TV through

digital satellite, cable, or the re-launched terrestrial system Freeview. A fourth possible delivery route—TV through telephone lines using broadband technology remains a non-starter for most consumers because the commonly available ADSL connections from BT run at only 512kbs which offers too little bandwidth for digital TV.

In most multi-channel TV homes—with the exception of 1.5m with Freeview and an estimated 300,000 which use BSkyB boxes solely to receive public service channels—the experience is expensive, based on hefty monthly subscriptions.

For homes with no intention of paying up to £40 a month for satellite or cable, the obvious technology is the Freeview digital terrestrial TV (DTT) system which delivers a multi-channel service free of charge through existing aerials. Its importance will rise as the government begins to plan for the switch-off of the old-technology analogue TV transmitter network, possibly between 2006 and 2010.

However, DTT is not a magic low-cost solution for everyone. At the moment only 82% of households are within reach of its digital transmitters, but more than a quarter of them need improved rooftop aerials to receive the service. Without new aerials, which can cost from £100 to £300 on top of the £50 to £100 cost of the adaptor box, only 54% of homes will be able to receive DTT.

Once the analogue transmitters are turned off—a political hot potato for some future government—coverage will be improved by boosting the power of digital services, but the exact improvement is still unknown. Final availability of DTT will depend on decisions about the cost of building new transmitters—currently there are 1100 analogue masts compared to only 80 digital—and the number of channels the government wants to auction off to mobile telecom operators.

The broadcasters themselves—BBC, ITV, C4 and C5—are unanimous in warning that it will be uneconomic to aim for the 99% coverage offered by analogue TV. Another shortcoming of free-to-air DTT is that millions of multi-occupied dwellings—flats and conversions—may be unable to receive the signal due to poor equipment installed by landlords, or the impossibility of erecting an outside aerial.

Alternative free-to-air systems for the 40% of people who say they don't want to pay subscriptions for cable or satellite will be non-existent once the analogue transmitters switch off, unless they are willing to invest hundreds of pounds in BSkyB equipment.

In our increasingly information-rich society access to TV and internet services will be taken for granted by those that can afford it, but be an envious dream for those that can't. The quiet revolution of the wired world will leave many of our poorest citizens behind unless the 'digital divide' is put back on the political agenda.

MEDIA MONITOR

Gannett/Newsquest

GANNETT, is in a dominant position in the US local newspaper market, owning 100 daily papers and more than 4000 weeklies or bi-weeklies, as well as the national title, *USA Today*. In the UK, it owns Newsquest, which has just announced a 7% improvement in profits, up to £203m.

Since Gannett acquired Newsquest in 1999 it has gone on a relentless acquisition trail for other regional newspaper titles, most recently the Scottish Media Group's Glasgow titles. Now its latest acquisition bid is for 45 London titles owned by Tony O'Reilly's Independent News and Media (owners also of *The Independent* and the *Independent on Sunday*).

Now the bid is the subject of a Competition Commission inquiry. The outcome of its deliberations will make interesting reading, because technically the bid didn't need to be referred to the Commission, which normally only deals with media ownership changes which exceed circulations of half a million. However what would happen if Newsquest acquired the titles is that it would increase its share of the metropolitan London market from 21% to 51%. In some South London areas it would go up to 72% and in a couple of areas 100%.

As the NUJ submission to the Competition Commission points out: 'If the public interest—that of plurality and diversity in the local press and of the maintenance and development of the direct relationship between the reporting concerns of newspapers and the specifically localised concerns of various communities—is to be served, then it is imperative that local newspapers are not acquired only to be closed down or to have their reporting facilities depleted.'

Of course, there is one thing that the Competition Commission cannot take into account. Ultimately decisions about investment in Newsquest or cutting jobs on titles aren't decided in the UK but back at Gannett's corporate headquarters in Tyson's Corner, Virginia. But let us hope that the Competition Commission produce a tough report in the areas where it can have an impact, such as preventing a 100% Newsquest monopoly in some London areas.

No drinking up time at the Last Chance Saloon

TOM O'MALLEY

'If the Lords and tycoons and conglomerates who own so much of our press would agree to follow the Press Council to the letter, then that might just hold. But it is the final fix of free medicine in the Last Chance Saloon' (*Guardian*, Editorial 4 February 1983)

The press has been drinking at the 'last chance saloon' since at least 1983. Twenty years on from the *Guardian's* Editorial, the recent report of the House of Commons Culture Media and Sport Committee, referred to how the Press had been drinking at that Saloon in 1993, when a National Heritage Committee report on the Press was published. Their latest report, published on June 16, offers a mild rebuke to the drinkers.*

The PCC's Chair is Sir Christopher Meyer, Press Secretary to John Major (1994-96), and Ambassador to the USA until last February. He took over in March 2003. His 'distinguished diplomatic background' doubtlessly helped present the right image to the Committee in the run up to the publication of the report.

Meyer, was happy with the Report: 'I have already set out in May an 8-point plan to increase independence, transparency, visibility and accountability. I welcome the fact that the Select Committee has endorsed this approach in its recommendations'

He was right to be happy. After considering the fact that in the years 1991-2000, only 321 adverse adjudications were made by the PCC out of 23,000 complaints, the Committee found 'it difficult to draw firm conclusions over precisely what the figures tell us!' (para.50) In the end the Committee framed its intervention on the PCC's performance in the following terms:

'Our own detailed recommendations...are aimed at what we perceive to be the twin necessities of increasing public confidence in improved arrangements whilst

keeping the press industry on board and paddling in the same direction' (para 60).

It recommended that the PCC set up a system whereby complainants could insist on an adjudication rather than mediation. It wants a 'dedicated pre-publication team' to handle issues in advance of publication. It asks for an updated Code on issues such as the privacy of emails, and banning payments to police for information. It pleads for an additional lay member, fixed terms for lay and press members and an independent figure in the PCC's appointments procedures.

Publications should be obliged to carry a notice of any adjudication on the front page and there should be automatic corrections of press archives to avoid the repetition of errors. It also considered that, where a complaint is upheld and has involved the complainant in costs, 'those costs should be met by the offending newspaper'.

These recommendations repeat ones made by successive enquiries since the 1960s in one guise or another. But, as Sir Christopher, who has agreed to report back to the Committee next year on progress in reforming the PCC, stated so smoothly in his response:

'My colleagues and I will of course read what the Select Committee has had to say in detail. It is important to remember, however, that as an independent body— independent from newspapers, politicians, lawyers and any other interest group—the PCC is not obliged to accept any of them.'

His words suggest a profound confidence in the fact that the government will do nothing to make the PCC do anything it doesn't want to. And, indeed, the man is right.

There is, however, one straw in the wind. The Committee firmly recommended that the government 'bring forward legislative proposals to clarify the protection that individuals can expect from unwarranted intrusion

by anyone...into their private lives. This is necessary fully to satisfy the obligations upon the UK under the European Convention of Human Rights' (para 34)

There is a good deal of legal confusion on this issue that, sooner or later, will have to be cleared up. On the evidence of the failure of this Select Committee to challenge self-regulation we are in danger of getting a very poor piece of legislation when it comes.

We need a statutory settlement for the press and the media in general, one that balances freedom of expression with citizens' rights. The Select Committee, this time around seems to have ducked the issue. It has left the music blaring, the lights glaring, and the Lords, tycoons, conglomerates and their hired hands free to carry on getting drunk and disorderly in the Last Chance Saloon.

* *Privacy and Media Intrusion*, Stationery Office, June 2003

Plaudits for Presswise

PRESSWISE is ten years old. The body, set up to assist people subjected to media intrusion, had a good profile in *The Daily Telegraph* media section on July 11. Its work around refugees, asylum seekers and the media has been very important, and it was particularly active in providing evidence to the Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee on Media Intrusion.

Presswise is also conducting a survey into the cases of one hundred people who complained to the Press Complaints Commission, and their reactions both to the experience and how procedures can be improved. This project was featured in *Guardian Online*, also on July 11.

WITHOUT COMMENT

“ And guess which papers joined the government's attack on the BBC? All that sucking up to Rupert Murdoch certainly paid off. I actually wrote a piece for one News International title, which, I believe, was cut from the paper because it didn't attack the BBC. ”

Charlie Whelan, *PR Week*, July 25, 2003

It's still bad news

BARRY WHITE on the Communications Act

AT around 12.30pm on Thursday 17 July, the Speaker of the House of Commons, Michael Martin MP rose to announce that the Communications Bill had received the Royal Assent, bringing the curtain down on the long running communications and telecoms legislation whose roots go back five years.

In July 1998 the Department of Trade and Industry and the Department of Culture, Media and Sport published a joint green paper—*Regulating Communications: approaching convergence in the Information Age*. The CPBF was highly critical, stating that media companies saw the paper as another opportunity to assert their commercial interests by shaping the policy debate around their priorities.

Fast forward nearly four years to May 2002. Chris Smith is no longer Culture Secretary, Tessa Jowell who had replaced him, introduced the draft Communications Bill in the following terms: 'For too long the UK's media have been over-regulated and over-protected from competition... The draft Bill we publish today will liberalise the market, so removing unnecessary regulatory burdens and cutting red tape.'

The government's timetable for completing the bill has been met. Fears that it would overshoot beyond the summer recess have not materialised. At the centre, the government's intentions to create a 'light touch' regulatory structure, supervised by Ofcom (which is also the telecoms regulator) and to encourage media consolidation, has been achieved. Channel 5 can still be acquired by a major newspaper group, although thanks to the efforts of Lord Puttnam and friends, suitors will have to face a 'plurality test', the details

of which are still awaited, although the final decision on such take-overs will rest with the secretary of state, not Ofcom. The green light has been given to foreign ownership of British broadcasting franchises with the lifting of the current restriction on non-European owners. The 20% limit on any shareholding in ITV is lifted so a merged ITV could take over complete ownership of ITV.

In addition to the plurality test, Lord Puttnam and his supporters in the Lords have forced upon a reluctant Ofcom an overall duty to further the interests of citizens as well as the interests of consumers. Just who will win out (apart from the lawyers) in the battle of priorities between 'the citizen' and the consumer (not to mention powerful media corporations) has yet to be seen. It's also not clear just how the as yet unknown guidelines on 'localness' will prevent a company like Clear Channel buying up the UK's commercial radio. On the other hand the Act has strengthened the duty to supply children's programming. And in what is the European Year for Disabled People, the Act obliges broadcasters to be subtitled 60% of their output in five years time rising to 80% in 10 years!

Clearly the government will be feeling pleased with themselves but with the Act signed, sealed and delivered, the Campaign's thoughts must turn to just how we can keep tabs on the new 'super regulator'.



REVIEW

Weapons of Mass Deception: The Uses of Propaganda in Bush's War on Iraq by Sheldon Rampton and John Stauber
Robinson £6.99

THE authors of this book work for the Center for Media and Democracy, based in Madison, Wisconsin (www.prwatch.org). The Center's mission is to investigate 'propaganda as it is waged by corporations and governments' and this book maintains the critical and revelatory insights of the authors' previous publications, *Toxic Sludge Is Good For You* and *Trust Us We're Experts*.

We can expect a torrent of books coming out on the Iraq War. This one should certainly be read because it provides the detail on how Bush's administration (the same techniques were used by Blair and Campbell here) manipulated public opinion and through a process of disinformation prepared the American people for war with Iraq. However this book is not a generalised attack on the US drive to war. Each chapter is packed with references and quotes from an array of sources to back up their analysis of themes like 'War Is Sell' and 'The Uses of Fear'.

I thought the chapters 'Double-speak' and 'The Air War' were particularly effective in their analysis of the relationship between politics and language and the performance of the US media coverage of the conflict, which was predominantly pro-war. The authors point out that the term 'axis of evil' is 'chosen to selectively stigmatise countries for the purpose of justifying military actions against them.'

As the dubious nature of the 'evidence' presented to justify war with Iraq begins to unravel, and the weapons of mass destruction remain propaganda creations, the book ends by suggesting 'we should ask ourselves whether we have made the mistake of believing our own propaganda, and whether we have been fighting against the wrong enemies, in the wrong places, with the wrong weapons.'

GRANVILLE WILLIAMS

AGM has the right ingredients

JONATHAN HARDY,
National Secretary

THIS year's AGM had all of my favourite elements. It was well attended, highly informative and broad-ranging, brisk, reflective, and it generated momentum with some concrete, positive ideas. AGMs also need powerful stories and good storytellers. Having watched Alistair Campbell's unprecedented tirade on *Channel Four News* two nights earlier it was fascinating to hear Nick Jones explain the sequence and significance of events and Ivor Gaber tell how a day of filming at *Channel Four News* for a media studies programme ended up capturing the drama (and staginess) of Campbell's performance.

Our discussion of future strategy was informed by an understanding of the CPBF's unique roots in the labour movement. The meeting endorsed Tom O'Malley's call for new thinking on policy, to influence both opinion-formers and to speak to the interests

and concerns of our natural supporters. It also backed ideas to develop our campaigning work on issues such as war reporting, disinformation and racism in the media. We agreed to update our 'right of reply' pack for the 21st century and establish an active interventionist role regarding OFCOM. The political and organisational challenges remain formidable, but CPBF Chair Julian Petley reminded us that our lobbying effort had achieved some results in the improvements demanded of the Communications Bill. Many were thanked, including Kathy Lowe, who started a new job in January after co-ordinating work on the Bill, and Barry White for his work as our Organiser.

NEXT ISSUE

DES FREEDMAN's important new book, *Television Policies of the Labour Party 1951-2001*, has just been published by Frank Cass. We will carry a review in the next *Free Press*.

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unleashed within the BBC.

Broadcasts based on unattributable sources have become more commonplace. The tag line, 'The BBC has learned...' is almost a daily occurrence. I fear we have sometimes been in danger of devaluing our own reporting.

In reality these exclusives are often based on briefings given by the government on an off-the-record basis. The aim of the spin doctor is to trade information in return for favourable coverage. Journalists are so hungry for exclusives we can find it hard to resist being fed a line; our dependence on off-the-record conversations can also lead to exaggeration.

I think broadcasters owe it to listeners and viewers to be far more disciplined. Stories based on a single, unidentified source should be the exception rather than the rule. I know from experience how easy it is to exaggerate a political story on the basis of just one conversation. I plead guilty to having fallen into that trap myself.

Nicholas Jones was a BBC political correspondent until October 2002

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