

The BBC after the Strike



WE went to press as union negotiations continued with the Director General, Mark Thompson, over the job cuts at the BBC.

The unions believe these would have a disastrous impact on programme quality and the health and welfare of staff. Jeremy Dear, NUJ General Secretary, said 'There is too much at stake for us to compromise the future of the BBC.'

What happens to the BBC now is crucial.

The Green Paper promised a new Charter and licence fee for ten years, but the assault on the BBC is now being renewed. Press coverage of the 24-hour strike indicated hostility to the BBC, not so much in the news reports which could not really distort the impact and success of the strike, but in the editorials and articles, where spleen and bias were given full rein.

'Be mean and keen: 4,000 job cuts is not nearly enough' Tom Bower urged in the *Evening Standard* (23/05/05). The *Sun* (24/05/05/) gloated 'the days of the Big Bloated Corporation are over' and 'viewers and listeners denied their daily fare may begin to question whether the money they pay for it is worth it'. (24/05/05) Stephen Glover in the *Daily Mail* (24.05.05) stated 'this country could manage to bump along without the BBC or, at any rate large swathes of it'.

The Green Paper, which the CPBF

has responded to, also raises some worrying policy issues: the creeping influence of Ofcom into oversight of the BBC's commercial operations and proposals for new ventures; reviews of the BBC's financing during the operation of the next Charter; and the commitment to commission up to halve of programmes from independent producers.

There is dramatic confirmation, in Ofcom's response to the Green Paper, that it too wants a far more prominent interventionist role in the BBC's operations.

We also now have James Purnell in charge of broadcasting at the Department of Culture, Media and Sport. As *The Guardian* (23/05/05) put it, he 'has been at the heart of the most influential media policy decisions of the past decade'. (The CPBF disagreed with most of them!)

In the coming months we must defend the BBC and public service broadcasting. We are producing a second edition of the pamphlet *Keeping Broadcasting Public*, with an update on the Green Paper.

We need your help to stimulate the widest possible debate on the future of the BBC, and to make sure MPs and ministers get the message.

Distribution danger

THE Office of Fair Trading wants to change the existing distribution agreement for magazines. This is one case when the newspaper and magazine publishers and our organisation broadly agree on an issue. The distribution system should be changed.

The OFT document, published in May, acknowledged a 'high level of public interest in this matter' and wants an extensive consultation on their proposals.

At present publishers do not own their means of distribution. This is left

to wholesalers who deliver daily around 14 million newspapers to a very large number of retail outlets, and 25 million magazines weekly.

The OFT view the arrangement as anti-competitive because wholesalers, in return for guaranteeing rapid delivery of titles to those who want them, are given a local monopoly. There are more than 100 exclusive wholesale territories.

The OFT acknowledges newspapers have a very tight time-frame and the perishability of the product merits special distribution arrangements. For magazines, however, the OFT notes that while there are 'magazines, such as TV listing guides, which cease to be in demand once their period of reference ends, this level of perishability does not necessitate overnight printing and delivery within the same narrow time-frame as newspapers'.

The newspaper publishers (with the exception of News International) and the magazine publishers want the present system to continue. There are flaws in it. For example tenders by the incumbent wholesaler were untested in over 50% of territories when contracts were re-tendered. Also the three largest wholesalers, Menzies, Dawson and WH Smith News, have consolidated their positions at the expense of independent wholesalers.

But there are dire predictions about the impact of any changes. In the USA a similar change saw a fall of 2000 magazine titles, and more than 20,000 retailers went out of business.

The Periodical Publishers' Association believes any change could place increasing power in the hands of just a few large supermarket chains. It also estimates that 1,000 magazines would be forced to close, with smaller publishing houses most at risk, and up to 12,000 retail newsagents could go out of business. The PPA thinks that shops in rural or deprived areas are particularly vulnerable.

The status quo should prevail and the OFT make an exemption for the distribution of both newspapers and magazines.

Protection of sources 'A denial of justice'

A YEAR ago Belgian police seized the notes, address books, copies of hard discs and email records of Hans-Martin Tillack, a former Brussels correspondent for the German magazine *Stern*.

In 2002 Tillack published a series of exposés on fraud within the Commission and its statistical arm, Eurostat, based on internal documents. Belgian authorities seized the materials as part of their investigations into allegations against Tillack by the Commission's anti-fraud office, Olaf. In particular Olaf claims that Tillack bribed officials for information-allegations he denies. He points out there has never been any evidence to support this accusation.

A judgement in April by the European Court of Justice said the Commission has the right to look at the material belonging to Tillack which the Belgian police seized. This judgement was strongly condemned by the European Federation of Journalists. 'There is no excuse for the Commission to go fishing through

these files, Aidan White said. 'This case illustrates just how inadequate is protection for journalists. The Commission makes unsubstantiated allegations against a reporter and then gets access to his confidential files which potentially compromise anyone who has talked to him. It is a shocking denial of justice to journalists and their sources.'

In a recent development the European ombudsman has accused Olaf of telling lies. In its report it concludes, 'Olaf should acknowledge that it made incorrect and misleading statements' in its submissions. It found it 'difficult to understand' why the anti-fraud office had referred to 'information from reliable sources' when any alleged statements 'constituted only hearsay evidence'.

Tillack now plans to take Belgium to the Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg for the return of his documents. Meanwhile, as Aidan White points out, 'the reporter's professional life remains under a cloud of uncertainty.'

Astroturfing

FREE PRESS readers will be clued up, we hope, to all the manipulative media tricks politicians use to spin their political messages. Here is a new one - 'astroturfing', or the faking of grassroots support for a politician or a product whose popularity needs boosting.

Channel 4's *Dispatches* programme (23/05/05), *The Dirty Tricks Election*, gave an insight into how it worked during Labour's 2005 election campaign. *Dispatches* reporter Jenny Kleeman, got a job in Labour's London regional press office in the run-up to the election, and then in its Victoria Street national campaign office. She filmed undercover in both places until one day she turned up for work and was swiftly escorted off the premises.

She revealed how party activists posed as 'real' people to create the

impression that they enthusiastically backed the government, but party minders were very quick to prevent journalists talking to them about exactly who they were at stage-managed photo-opportunities for the media during the campaign.

One of Jenny Kleeman's jobs was to compile model letters for use in local newspapers. The letters later appeared virtually word for word in local newspapers under the names of local party activists who did not declare their allegiances.

The technique of astroturfing, the programme revealed, originated with pharmaceutical firms encouraging patients to write letters praising the effects of certain drugs. Now it is used by politicians for political propaganda. Remember that chilling phrase by Peter Mandelson? 'Our job is to create the truth.'

Robin Aitkin & the biased BBC

VISIT a Barnes and Noble or Borders bookstall in the USA and look under the section Current Affairs/Media.

There are a skew of books exposing the liberal media conspiracy. Bernard Goldberg's *Bias and Arrogance: Rescuing America From the Media Elite*; *Slander* by Ann Coulter, *The New Thought Police* by Tammy Bruce, and many, many more.

It all seems so weird, especially when you turn on the TV and watch Bill O'Reilly on 'Fair and Balanced' Fox News.

Now in the UK Robin Aitkin, a seasoned BBC reporter, has taken a redundancy package from the BBC and is writing a book provisionally titled *Taking Sides: Bias at the BBC*. A *Daily Telegraph* article (24/05/05) quotes him asserting: 'There is a centre-Left consensus within the BBC which colours its entire output and undermines its solemn pact with the public to present the news impartially.' His views have been taken up by a variety of websites—from the Adam Smith Institute to biased BBC, and of course in the USA, where websites make the link to what they perceive is their own biased public service broadcaster, PBS. We await the book with interest.

WITHOUT COMMENT

FA hires from DCMS

“ Sky's current £1bn deal for live Premiership football expires in 2007 and the FA has hired Bill Bush, who was the special adviser to the culture secretary, to take up the role of the director of public policy at the Premier League. With a brief involving regulatory and public affairs, Bush will be closely involved in the negotiations leading up to the new TV rights contract. Tim Vine, the press officer to the sports minister, Richard Caborne, is also leaving the government department to take up a role as the Premier League's head of PR. ”

www.advanced-television.com/2005/news
30/05/05

WHEN ERRORS HIT THE INFORMATION SUPERHIGHWAY

MIKE JEMPSON

SINISA Nadazdin, the charity worker from Montenegro who recently won £40,000 in damages and an apology from the *Sunday Mirror* for being falsely accused of child trafficking, now faces a new dilemma.

Hundred of references to the original story are scattered all over the Internet, in chat rooms and on websites as varied as White Pride World Wide and the Marijuana and Hemp Network. Neo-fascist groups are using it to attack Roma, and neo-con's to attack the UN—since infowars.com and on global-conspiracies.com ran the story under the misleading headline 'Children Sold Into Slavery by UN Charity'. One French/Nepalese children's rights groups has even referred the incorrect story to Interpol.

His was one of many similar cases discussed during a session on 'The rules of the game: On-line journalism and archives' at the Organisation of News Ombudsmen conference hosted by *The Guardian* in May.

Tagging online versions of articles that turn out to be incorrect or libellous may protect publications from legal action, explained media lawyers Siobhain Butterworth and Mark Stephens. They said that canny plaintiffs were seeking out the best jurisdiction in which to sue now that the internet guarantees global distribution.

Even displaying a hyperlink that takes visitors to a dubious article could land publishers in court they warned. Ironically judgements over such hi-tech issues may rely upon case law dating back to 1813 (*Smith v Wood*) and 1894 (*Hird v Wood*).

Sinisa and his lawyers now have the daunting task of tracking down website owners and persuading them to remove the false allegations. Continued dissemination could count against him if the Montenegrin authorities pursue the defamation action that still hangs over him and four others for bringing the state into disrepute. Meanwhile the children whose images appeared in the original story have since been moved

to worse accommodation in Podgorica, and may have to go into care while their mother receives medical treatment. As with the Internet, the consequences of this story have ramifications that few could have predicted.

COMMUNITY NEWSPAPER USES FOI ACT

INTERESTING story in *Press Gazette* (20/05/05) about the *Armthorpe Community Newsletter*, which goes out free to 6,000 households in Armthorpe, Doncaster. Jim Oldfield, the editor, used the Freedom of Information Act to get background information on the Creutzfeldt-Jacobs disease, which led to the deaths of four victims in the area five years ago.

The paper dedicated eight pages to the investigation, and branded the official public inquiry into the outbreak 'an astonishing sham of an investigation'.

The Newsletter discovered that one of the CJD victims was a blood donor, but seven people who were given his blood were unaware of the fact until last September. A public inquiry was originally launched by the old Doncaster Area Health Authority (now the East Doncaster Primary Care Trust) to establish the source of the outbreak. It failed to track down the butcher linked to the outbreak as the business has ceased trading. The Newsletter claimed to find the butcher in five minutes by calling a local historian.

Editor Jim Oldfield adds, 'They also said they couldn't trace the meat supply back to the abattoir as they had gone out of business.'

Seems like good old-fashioned journalism, backed up by the FoI Act, is alive and well in Armthorpe.

JIM'S JOURNAL

JIM Brennan is still producing his own network of community journals in the East Midlands. As he points out in the latest issue of the *Derby Telegram* part of its job is to keep an eye on the outpost of Lord Rothermere's empire in the East Midlands. Northcliffe Newspapers, the regional newspaper arm of the Daily Mail group, owns the

evening papers right across the region: Derby, Leicester, Lincoln, Nottingham, and out to Scunthorpe, Grimsby and Hull, with the same company's morning free *Metro* now added.

'The printing plant at Derby is now a massive regional centre catering for editions of the Daily Mail and Metro, and other evening newspapers and special supplements published by the group,' he points out.

There is a network of not-for-profit community journals covering the East Midlands. If you want to find out more about Jim's journals you can contact him at Brennan Publications 148 Birchover Way Allestree Derby DE22 2RW Tel 01332 551884 or brenmedia@btinternet.com and send him a donation to support an independent voice and to help him cover the costs of his efforts.

THE G8 ALTERNATIVES

ON Sunday 3 July from 10am to 9 pm Edinburgh will host one of the biggest days of political debate Scotland has ever seen.

The G8 Alternatives Summit will bring together leading campaigners, activists and thinkers to debate the strategies coming emerging from the Gleneagles G8 Summit.

Over 5,000 people are expected to attend eight plenaries on topics such as the future of Africa, climate change, and globalisation and privatisation. There will be over 50 workshops and seminars on diverse subjects including: resisting neoliberal media, the Chavez Government in Venezuela and the campaign against Coca-Cola.

Speakers at the resisting neoliberal media seminar include Jeremy Dear NUJ General Secretary, David Miller, Spinwatch; Pete Murray NUJ campaign to defend Public Service Broadcasting and Granville Williams, CPBF.

For more information about the Summit, visit the G8 Alternatives website: www.g8alternatives.org

Tickets available from Usher Hall, Queens Hall, Edinburgh University, Edinburgh.

Box Office: 0131 228 1155 or email: boxoffice.admin@usherhall.co.uk £10 Waged, £5 Unwaged

Conference tackles US media crisis



GRANVILLE WILLIAMS reports on the National Conference for Media Reform in St Louis 13-15 May 2005

BACK in November 2003 I attended what still ranks for me as the most powerful and inspiring event on media reform I have been involved in. The event was the first Media Reform conference held in Madison, Wisconsin. Originally the organisers were planning an event for around 200 people, but the battle against the plans by the Federal Communications Commission over ownership energised and inspired people and 2000 people attended. The highpoint was a rally in the Coliseum Theatre, Madison at which Bill Moyers, then working for NOW (the highly regarded current affairs programme on PBS) spoke. But there were lots of other seminars and sessions where people learnt and shared experiences. By the end of the conference there was a definite sense that something significant had happened in Madison. A movement was born.

The conference in St Louis confirmed that. It had the phrase 'Gathering Momentum' under the conference logo on conference publicity, and it definitely is. 2500 people attended, and more wanted to come but the organisers had to close the bookings—there was no more room.

I was interested in who these people were, and why they were there. Of course the media activist groups were there: FAIR, Media Access Project, Media Alliance, and so on. Groups representing black and Hispanic media activism were also more strongly present than at the first conference. The big names were there too: Naomi Klein; Patti Smith and Sandy Perlman talking about the music industry; the two FCC Commissioners, Michael Kopps and Jonathan Adelstein who led the fight against the ownership rule changes; Amy Goodman from Democracy Now!; and Bob McChesney and John Nichols, the co-founders of Free Press. But the vast majority of the people there wanted to do something about a battered and discredited commercial media system, and

the threat to public service broadcasting.

They made the connection between the state of the media and the state of America. 'I'm just pissed off,' was one woman's response to my question why she was there, and she wanted to do something. Another couple were obviously comfortably off, living in a retirement community in Phoenix, Arizona, but the Iraq war and e-activism around MoveOn.org had spurred an interest in the media. They began to read voraciously, do university study courses on the media. The wife put it very simply: 'There's talk of the draft coming back. I have a 27-year old son and I don't want him going to Iraq.'

One criticism of the first conference was that there was not enough space for people to talk about issues of common interest, and to exchange experiences of successful initiatives. This time there was. There were caucuses for specific interest groups such as lawyers, artists and musicians, educators. I attended one for journalists, convened by Linda Foley of the Newspaper Guild-Communications Workers of America. It was packed out, with many of those present from the mainstream media. There were action clinics, including ones on media monitoring, online organising, lobbying, starting a media activist network in a local community. And you could take away with you a wallet, the Free Press Media Reform Tool Kit, full of information about the media and what activists can do to change it.

In the final conference session John Nichols described 'a perfect storm' that was coming. The Telecommunications Act of 1996 is due for revision in the next couple of years; censorship, whipped up by the religious right, is now threatening broadcasters; and public service broadcasting is under attack. The policy choices were simple he said: 'Wall Street or Main Street. The White House or your house.'

Bill Moyers, now retired, decided to come at the last minute to address the conference and the power of his speech and the revelations in it, provided a dramatic finale to the conference.

The threat to Public Service Broadcasting

'REPUBLICANS are pursuing an aggressive strategy to destroy the spirit of public broadcasting while

maintaining the shell of a system that calls itself public broadcasting. And it is working. We believe the dramatic decline in viewers and contributors reflects an erosion of support from core viewers.' This is the view of Jerry Starr, founder of Citizens for Independent Public Broadcasting, speaking in a session on Public Broadcasting at the conference.

In the same session Charlie Cray, from the Center for Corporate Policy, made a contribution

'They have the money. They have the lobbyists.

All we have is the people.'

JOHN NICHOLS Co-Founder, Free Press

which highlighted how creeping commercialisation is also influencing the content of programmes. A joint news release from KVIE (PBS Sacramento) and the American Farm Bureau proudly announced 'a new weekly public television show that celebrates the miracle of American agriculture and the farm and ranch families that help make it possible...' It went on, 'The magazine-style, half-hour program will focus on our national love of the land, our fascination with food and the bedrock American values of family, hard work and independence that make our agricultural system the finest in the world.'

The sting in the tale is that Monsanto is also supporting the programme, along with the Farm Bureau. This will inevitably result in biased information about genetically modified food and an absence of any serious investigation about legitimate scientific and consumer concerns about GM food.

Bill Moyers' Free Press conference speech.

We print a section of it below. For the full text go to: www.freepress.net/conference

'...PBS asked me after 9/11 to start a new weekly broadcast. They wanted us to make it different from anything else on the air-commercial or public broadcasting. They asked us to tell stories no one else was reporting and to offer a venue to people who might not otherwise be heard...and in that spirit, we went about reporting on Washington as no one else in broadcasting—except occasionally 60 Minutes—was doing. We reported on the expansion of the Justice Department's power of surveillance. We reported on the escalating

Pentagon budget and expensive weapons that didn't work. We reported on how campaign contributions influenced legislation and policy to skew-resources to the comfortable and well-connected while our troops were fighting in Afghanistan and Iraq with inadequate training and armour. We reported on how the Bush administration was shredding the Freedom of Information Act. We went around the country to report on how closed-door, backroom deals in Washington were costing ordinary workers and tax-payers their livelihood and security. We reported on offshore tax havens that enable wealthy and powerful Americans to avoid their fair share of national security and the social contract.

And always—because what people know depends on who owns the press—we kept coming back to the media business itself, to how mega media corporations were pushing journalism further and further down the hierarchy of values, how giant radio cartels were silencing critics while shutting communities off from essential information, and how the mega media companies were lobbying the FCC for the right to grow ever more powerful.

The broadcast caught on. Our ratings grew every year. There was even a spell when we were the only public affairs broadcast on PBS whose audience was going up instead of down...

Strange things began to happen. Friends in Washington called to say that they had heard of muttered threats that the PBS reauthorisation would be held off 'unless Moyers is dealt with.' The chairman of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, Kenneth Tomlinson, was said to be quite agitated.

I thought the current CPB board would like to hear and talk about the importance of standing up to political interference. I was wrong. They wouldn't meet with me. I tried three times. And it was all downhill after that.

I was naive, I guess. I simply never imagined that any CPB chairman, Democrat or Republican, would cross the line from resisting White House pressure to carrying it out for the White House. But that's what Kenneth Tomlinson has done.

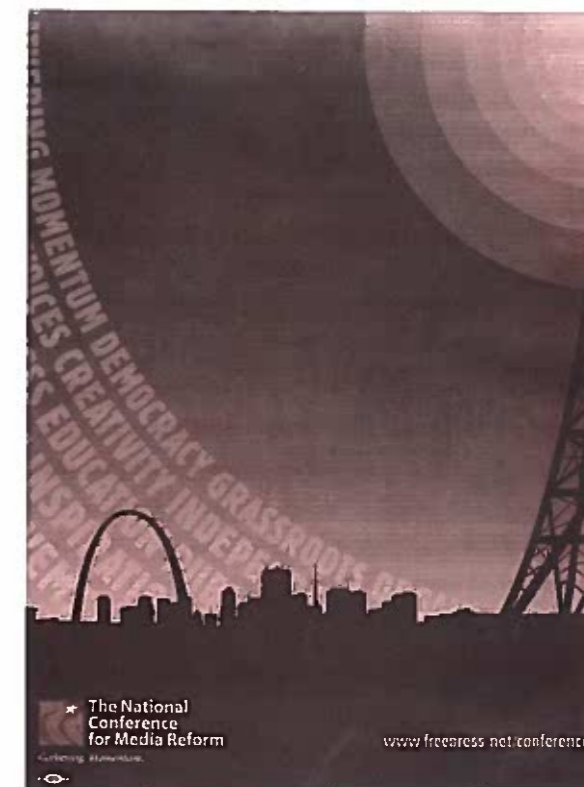
On Fox News this week he denied that he's carrying out a White House mandate or that he's ever had any conversations with any Bush administration official about PBS. But the New York Times reported that he enlisted Karl Rove to help kill a proposal that would have put on the CPB board people with experience in local radio and

television. The Times also reported that 'on the recommendation of administration officials' Tomlinson hired a White House flack (I know the genre) named Mary Catherine Andrews as a senior CPB staff member. While she was still reporting to Karl Rove at the White House, Andrews set up CPB's new ombudsman's office and had a hand in hiring the two people who will fill it, one of whom once worked for ... you guessed it ... Kenneth Tomlinson.

I would like to give Mr. Tomlinson the benefit of the doubt, but I can't. According to a book written about the Reader's Digest when he was its Editor-in-Chief, he surrounded himself with other right-wingers—a pattern he's now following at the Corporation for Public Broadcasting.

There is Ms. Andrews from the White House. For acting president, he hired Ken Ferree from the FCC, who was Michael Powell's enforcer when Powell was deciding how to go about allowing the big media companies to get even bigger. According to a forthcoming book, one of Ferree's jobs was to engage in tactics designed to dismiss any serious objection to media monopolies...

It's not likely that with guys like this running the CPB some public television producer is going to say, 'Hey, let's do something on how big media is affecting democracy.'



BBC's new complaints system

MIKE JEMPSON

THE fallout from the suicide of Dr David Kelly decapitated the BBC and forced the Corporation to rethink its editorial management and journalistic standards. If that were not legacy enough for a man who put himself at risk in order that the public would not be conned, we owe him another debt of gratitude for his latest bequest—the new BBC programme complaints system.

On the day of the BBC strike, Deputy Director General Mark Byford told the 25th anniversary Conference of the Organisation of News Ombudsmen in London, that the Board of Governors were keen for improvements 'well before the serious consequences of what Andrew Gilligan said (on *Today*) at 6.07am on 29 May 2003' made themselves felt.

They were not the only ones to have 'significant concerns about the consistency, transparency and quality of complaint handling'. MediaWise had long bemoaned the opaque, utterly defensive and often unhelpful attitude of the old Programme Complaints Unit, which was long overdue for an overhaul.

The new system has emerged from the Neill Committee's review of issues raised by Lord Hutton's forensic critique of the Corporation's failures. It is sad that it took such a tragedy to teach the BBC some very simple lessons—that complaints should be handled equably, speedily and transparently; broadcasters should not be afraid to admit mistakes and put them right, and that their primary accountability is to licence-fee payers.

The BBC now expects to process and resolve complaints within 10 working days. As before, complaints can still be made direct to a programme or BBC service, but there is now a special website for complainants:

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/complaints/>. You can even register a complaint by visiting the new BBC Governors website:

<http://www.bbcgovernors.co.uk/>, another welcome nod towards

accountability.

Complaints unresolved at the first stage are referred to the Editorial Complaints Unit, independent of programme makers, which has 20 days to complete its investigation. Its findings are binding on all BBC divisions, but complainants may appeal to the Governor's Programme Complaints Committee which can call in outside consultants to assist. And if you don't trust the BBC to handle its own complaints fairly, you can go direct to OfCom.

The results of complaints may be broadcast at an appropriate moment, but they are also posted to the complaints website.

Regardless of the outcome all complaints are logged centrally and reported monthly to a Complaints Management Board, chaired by Byford, on which all BBC divisions are represented. They review the statistics, trends and themes and play back to programme-makers what lessons need to be learned.

To embed the system among staff, each has been sent a fetching leaflet featuring a banana skin over the legend 'Don't ignore this'. It stresses that 'effective handling of complaints is one of the most important demon-

strations of the BBC's commitment to serving the public,' says Byford.

'Perceptions about the BBC by the millions of people who contact us each year are heavily influenced by the kind of treatment they receive. When they (make a) complaint, if we appear routinely defensive and distanced then we will appear arrogant, self-interested and bureaucratic. We want to be open, transparent, fair and accountable.'

To complete the package Byford explains that the BBC News 24 Newswatch programme, and its accompanying website:

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/newswatch/ukfs/hi/default.stm> provide an opportunity for direct challenges to editors, correspondents and presenters. He insists the system is working well already, and acknowledges that a willingness to admit mistakes encourages trust between the Corporation and its owners – the licence payers.

It is all a far cry from the self-serving arrogance of the infamous 'No need for a right of reply' internal memo issued 20 years ago by the then Assistant Director News & Current Affairs, Alan Protheroe MBE, and leaked to *Free Press* (No. 27, Jan/Feb 1985).

WITHOUT COMMENT

“ ON 27 May, ActionAid will publish an extraordinary, damning report, *Real Aid: an agenda for making aid work*. With the G8 meeting due at Gleneagles in Scotland in July, and the Blair government propagating the nonsense that it is on the side of the world's poor, the report reveals that the government is inflating the value of its already minimal aid to poor countries by a third, and that the bulk of all western aid is actually 'phantom aid', which means that it has nothing to do with the reduction of poverty..

The ActionAid report quotes Brad Adams of Human Rights Watch: 'In the 1980s there was a popular T-shirt satirising US army recruitment commercials with the slogan: 'Join the army. Travel to exotic, distant lands. Meet exciting, unusual people. And kill them.' In the new millennium, it could be rephrased: 'Join the aid community. Travel to exotic, distant lands. Meet exciting, unusual people. And make a killing.'”

John Pilger *New Statesman* 27 May 2005

The blame game

JULIE-ANN DAVIES

THE tempestuous relationship between the Bush Administration and the media was dealt a further blow when *Newsweek* reported that a soldier at Guantanamo Bay had desecrated the Koran.

The report, published in the 9 May edition of the magazine, was based on a single anonymous source who said a Pentagon report would confirm accusations that a guard had flushed a copy of the Koran down the toilet.

The magazine had checked the story, before publication, with a Pentagon official who challenged one aspect of the piece but remained silent on the core allegation.

When street violence in Afghanistan claimed the lives of at least 17 people the White House cited the article as the direct cause of the riots and attacked the publication.

On 16 May *Newsweek* apologised for errors in the piece. Editor Mark Whittaker said: 'Our original source later said he couldn't be certain about reading of the alleged Koran incident in the report we cited, and said it might have been in other investigative documents or drafts'

The Pentagon's chief spokesman, Lawrence DiRita, called the apology 'tepid' and 'qualified'. He said: 'They owe us a lot more accountability than they took,' and added, 'They printed a story that was demonstrably false and that resulted in riots in which people were killed.'

However, Afghan President Karzai said he did not believe that *Newsweek's* story cost lives in Afghanistan and General Carl Eichenberry, a US commander in Afghanistan, said the riots were 'not at all tied to the magazine.' Both comments were widely ignored by the Bush Administration.

Scott McClellan, the White House press secretary, said *Newsweek* must consider how it could repair the 'lasting damage' arising from its reporting. He said: 'Our United

States military personnel go out of their way to make sure that the Holy Koran is treated with care.'

It is undeniable that *Newsweek* made mistakes but there are other accounts of Koran desecration by American forces. The International Committee of the Red Cross revealed it had previously passed to the Pentagon 'credible' reports of Guantanamo staff disrespecting Korans.

Similar claims to those made by *Newsweek* have appeared in several other publications. *The New York Times* reported that a former interrogator at Guantanamo had corroborated an account of guards throwing Korans into a pile and stepping on them—an act that provoked a hunger strike at the prison.

The American Civil Liberties Union recently unearthed and published FBI documents detailing 13 further allegations from Guantanamo detainees. This revelation prompted an admission from the Pentagon that it had substantiated five occasions when American personnel at the prison had 'mishandled' the Koran.

Given the abuse of prisoners at Abu Ghraib it is apparent that although the *Newsweek* story was flawed the overall thrust of the piece may not be far off the mark. The White House's attempt to blame *Newsweek* for its tarnished reputation in the middle-East is at best cynical and hypocritical.

A report in the *New York Times* on 18 May may bring us closer to the truth. Another anonymous source, a republican 'close to the White House', told the newspaper the *Newsweek* report was being exploited to control the press. The source said: 'There is no expectation that they're going to bring down *Newsweek*, but there is a feeling there is no check on what you guys do.' By condemning *Newsweek's* use of an anonymous source it has deflected attention from its own failings and issued a warning to the media.

ofcom watch

Ofcom published its new broadcasting code at the end of May. It draws together and updates the rules on taste and decency, impartiality and sponsorship that it inherited from the five regulatory bodies it replaced in December 2003. Tim Suter, the senior partner for broadcasting and standards at Ofcom said broadcasters will be allowed to combine 'freedom of expression with editorial justification'.

'Allowing broadcasters to transmit challenging materials—even when it causes offence to some—that's got to be a good thing'

Julian Petley CPBF co-chair, interview with *Broadcast* 3 June 2005

What that means is that they will be given greater leeway to transmit controversial scenes after the watershed 'provided it is editorially justified and the audience given appropriate information'.

Some aspects of the revised code have a distinctly temporary nature. For example, the new rules only apply to television and radio and not to broadband connection or mobile devices but that could change. Also product placement is still banned but Ofcom will look at the issue again later this year. Sponsorship of news and current affairs programmes is also still prohibited under the current European Union directive, *Television Without Frontiers*, with a new, long-delayed directive due in 2006. Any changes in its broadcasting policy proposals will also lead to changes in Ofcom's broadcasting codes.

ofcom watch

CPBF RESPONSE TO GREEN PAPER

Tom O'Malley compiled our response to the DCMS Green Paper, 'A strong BBC, independent from government'. The document makes a determined defence of the BBC's future role: it 'should continue to be at the forefront of developments in technology and part of its brief should be continue to develop methods of extending public service content into the emerging mass and niche platforms of the digital age'.

It is strongly critical of the idea that Ofcom should be involved in the BBC's internal activities to oversee competition issues.

There is also strong criticism of the proposal by the Director General, Mark Thompson, to move towards outsourcing of BBC production. The CPBF argues that there should be no increase in the current quota and instead argues for 'an independent investigation into conditions of work, equal opportunities, training and commissioning practices in the independent sector'.

The document also rejects proposals to review the BBC during the next ten-year Charter, including the idea that the licence fee should be

'distributed more widely'.

The full text of our response is on our website: www.freepress.org.uk

CHECK IT OUT

UK Watch Collective has launched their site. It focuses on the United Kingdom and collects comment, analysis and opinion pieces of interest

to activists and scholars of the left. The advisory board includes Michael Albert (ZNET), Mark Curtis, David Miller (Spinwatch), John Pilger and Olivier Hoedeman (Corporate Europe Observatory).

The collective have limited resources to publicise the site and are appealing for prominent links to: www.ukwatch.net

AGGM

Saturday 9 July 2005
10am-1pm

(Registration from 9.30)

NUJ Headquarters, 308 Gray's
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Guest speaker

Aidan White

General Secretary
International Federation of
Journalists on Globalisation
and the Media

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