

Pressure on the BBC

THE CPBF has given priority over the past two years to its campaign to defend the BBC and public service broadcasting. The White Paper outlining the terms of the BBC Charter is due out in December this year and in 2006 the BBC will receive its new Charter.

It has been a roller-coaster of a campaign, initiated in the destructive aftermath of the Hutton report. We have also seen the continuing attack on the BBC by commercial rivals, notably the Murdoch press. Take three examples:

- the leaking of the tape of a John Humphrys speech by former Labour spin doctor, Tim Allen, to *The Times*. The repercussions of this rumble on, as the *New Statesman* piece by John Kampfner (10 October 2005) demonstrated. He claimed that BBC journalism was being muzzled because a 'corporate loss of courage' required that ministers be placated during the crucial stage of licence fee negotiations. He also claims that the BBC chairman, Michael Grade, wanted John Humphrys sacked (both claims were quickly and vehemently denied by the Director General, Mark Thompson but John Kampfner stood by his report).

- BSkyB chief executive James Murdoch has attacked the BBC's digital ambitions. He accuses the BBC of duplicating services already developed by their commercial rivals.
- the revelation by Rupert Murdoch of Tony Blair's private remarks about the BBC's coverage of Hurricane Katrina being 'full of hatred of America'. This clearly indicates Tony Blair's loyalties lie with Rupert Murdoch and President Bush, but not with the BBC.

At the same time we have had the comments by John Birt at the Edinburgh Television Festival,

implying that C4 should get public funding to sustain its PSB remit. At the Royal Television Society conference the Culture Minister, Tessa Jowell, cut from her speech similar remarks about C4.

Put all of this together and it is fair to assume that there is still some uncertainty about what the final form of the BBC Charter will be. Over the coming months the CPBF will be pulling out all the stops to mobilise support for the maintenance of a strong, independent BBC.

- We have just produced a new, updated version of our pamphlet by Tom O'Malley, *Keeping Broadcasting Public: The BBC and the 2006 Charter Review*

- We now have a date for an important conference which we will hold on the BBC White Paper. This conference will have the support of the TUC and the media unions.

Put the date in your diary now: 28 January 2006. The venue will be the



TUC Congress House, London. Full details in the next issue and on our website as they become available

- E-activism. Sign up to our website specifically devoted to campaigning for the future of public service broadcasting at www.cpbf.org.uk

It's not cricket

THE prime minister said, 'The Ashes should be freely available on television for all to watch without having to pay subscription charges.' Unfortunately it was the Australian prime minister, John Howard, who said it. In 1999 cricket in the UK was moved from the 'A' list of protected sporting events (the FA cup, Wimbledon finals and Grand National) to the 'B' list which

guarantees only free-to-air highlights.

After the English Ashes victory captured the public's enthusiasm the uncomfortable reality dawned that only viewers with satellite television will be able to watch next year as Sky Sports has the rights in a four-year £220 million deal. A grassroots movement was set up by cricket fans in September, committed to restoring the main home Test series to free-to-air TV. The website is: www.keepcricketfree.com

The rise and rise of the censor

BARRY WHITE

FREEDOM of expression is under attack. New Labour's Racial and Religious Hatred Bill fails to distinguish the critical from the criminal. Under other legislation it is also an offence for a journalist (or anyone else) to fail to tell police of any activity by organisations deemed to be terrorist, which could be used against journalists reporting aspects of the so called 'war on terror'. The new legislation on terrorism contains some odious provisions which attack freedom of expression. Under the proposed measures there is a new offence of 'glorifying' terrorism where you could be found guilty of encouraging terrorism even when you had no such intention. This could have a chilling effect on journalists' right to report and their scrutiny of the state power. According to Liberty, glorification is so broad that the Home Secretary will take powers to determine which historical figures were terrorists and which freedom fighters. Then there are the attacks on freedom of expression by religious groups. Last December the play *Behzti (Dishonour)* by Gurpreet Kaur Bhatti was the subject of violent protest by some members of the Sikh community, which resulted in further performances of the play in Birmingham being cancelled. Nine months later Gurpreet is still in hiding, in fear for her life.

Then there was the orchestrated campaign on behalf of religious groups, which led to the BBC receiving over 50,000 protests against the proposed broadcasting of Jerry Springer—*The Opera*. The protestors showed remarkable foreknowledge of the opera's content in seeking to suppress a programme none of them had seen!

It was particularly timely that at this year's TUC in Brighton, the question of censorship was discussed around motions from the Writers' Guild of Great Britain, whose members are often in the front line. They highlighted the dangers in the Racial and Religious Hatred Bill and

the events surrounding the above-mentioned productions. They also called on affiliated unions and the General Council to publicise such cases, co-ordinate resistance to censorship and support creators and other workers who may be affected by censorship.

Congress passed the motion, although the General Council did have some reservations, making it clear that support for the motion did not mean endorsing views that were considered offensive! As Lydia Rivlin, chair of the Guild's newly established Anti-Censorship Committee pointed out to Congress '...that's the little problem with free speech, isn't it? Because with free speech, we always end up hearing things we'd rather not.'

The following week Andrew Gumbel writing in *The Independent* (21 September) highlighted another example of censorship, US-style. This time it's films that are being sanitised. A few years ago a Utah company called CleanFlick burst onto the censorship scene offering videos and DVDs for rent, after they had been edited to remove content, which was

deemed likely to be offensive to the local Mormon population. Fast-forward to today and this small venture has mushroomed spanning numerous states and attracting the attention of both politicians and lawyers. Now it is mainstream films that are being censored to remove so called 'offensive scenes' without permission of the filmmakers. Attempts to take the censors to law for infringement of intellectual property were finally frustrated when the Bush administration passed the Family Movie Act, which legitimised what the censors/sanitisers were doing, much to the delight of the Republican Party's Christian fundamentalist base and some Democrats. Whether such a bigoted venture could take off in the UK is questionable, but what is clear is that the two-prong attacks on freedom of expression from Government and religious groupings present a serious threat to democracy and liberty. We ignore it at our peril. To find out more about the Writers Guild campaign against censorship visit their website at: www.writers-guild.org.uk

ADVERT

MILTON AND THE MODERN MEDIA: a defence of a free press

JOHN Milton's pamphlet *Areopagitica* was a passionate plea for people to be able to publish and express ideas free from the control of censors. Published in 1644, during the English Civil War, it remains one of the classic documents in the struggle for a free press.

This reprint of the pamphlet has an extensive introduction by Granville Williams which both sets the pamphlet in its historical context, and includes a review of censorship controversies since 1979.

You can buy a copy of the booklet from the publishers for £4 including p&p. Send cheques to B&D 6-8 Church Street Church Accrington BB5 4LF

FREEDOM OF INFORMATION BLOCKAGE

THE Freedom of Information Act, fully operative since January 2005, is under pressure as a result of a mounting backlog of appeals against government secrecy. The Information Commissioner, Richard Thomas, has the job of resolving complaints but three quarters of the appeals lodged since January against refusals to supply information remain unresolved. The Commissioner's staff has been deluged with 1,642 appeals in the past six months and the number is growing at the rate of five a day. There are 28 full-time staff and five part-time staff

It appears that the soaring number of appeals is partly due to the obstacles placed in front of requests by the Central Clearing House (CCH), a unit within the Department for Constitutional Affairs, which has adopted obstructive tactics. Its role is to ensure consistency across Whitehall and other government agencies in dealing with FoI requests, but it has published guidelines to civil servants on how to block requests that ask only if a piece of information exists.

The CCH document gives a flavour of the obstructive approach. It advises officials to consider whether they can use 'the principle of neither confirm or deny' to bat away an application for information: 'Whether information is, or is not, held is in itself information and that confirmation of this fact may be damaging to the public interest. For a public authority to confirm or deny if it holds information is a matter which always requires careful consideration.'

Whitehall departments have also been told to refuse a request from the Campaign for Freedom of Information about the number of FoI appeals they were dealing with.

It seems that the culture of secrecy is still alive and thriving in Whitehall.

OTTAKAR'S DEMISE

HMV/WATERSTONE's takeover of Ottakar's, if it goes ahead, will mean that the merged bookstore chain has nearly 24 per cent of the market. The prospect certainly does not please authors, publishers or readers.

Anthony Beevor, chair of the Society

of Authors, believes it will concentrate too much financial and marketing power in the hands of too few booksellers, with a small number of Waterstone's buyers determining what goes on to the shelves of bookshops.

Publishers have sent a sharp letter to the Office of Fair Trading (OFT) objecting to the deal which would 'constitute the effective ending of mainstream competition in the specialist high-street bookselling market'. The combined chain would have a 'clear incentive to reduce the number of titles in favour of the most popular titles, thereby reducing diversity and choice for the consumer'.

Tracy Chevalier, author of *Girl With a Pearl Earring*, did her own contrast and compare exercise on the window displays for Waterstone's in Hampstead and Ottakar's in Dorchester and concluded, 'Waterstone's is publicising value-for-money while Ottakar's caters for people's interests.' She points out that Waterstone's also has some mandatory promotions which must appear in all shop window displays - the Great Value New Books with the same 15 books, whereas Ottakar's suggests displays but leaves it up to the manager's judgement to decide what best suits the local customers.

The really big issue is whether there is the basis for a reference to the Competition Commission (CC) by the OFT. The trade publication, *The Bookseller*, commissioned two competition lawyers to examine the acquisition and they concluded that intense price competition and the fact that millions of titles are available online diminish the market power of 'Wottaker's'. The lawyers think that the OFT will not give any weight to the argument that books are a special case and approve the takeover.

But there is another powerful argument for a reference to the CC. If supermarkets and airport bookstores are excluded, because they offer very little beyond the high-volume bestsellers, often at heavily discounted prices, then the new company's market share is nearer 50%. Now that really does raise competition concerns, but will the OFT act on them?

The Society of Authors believes that if Ottakar's is absorbed by Waterstone's 'the range of books available to the public will decline, with Waterstone's exercising yet more control over what is sold (and to some extent what is published).'

OFT AND MAGAZINE DISTRIBUTION

BEFORE we went to press the OFT should have given its response to the public consultation on their draft proposals to tear up current distribution agreements, which ensure that magazines are distributed with newspapers.

The draft proposal drew a fierce critical response from a wide cross-section of the media. It is not often that Michael Heseltine and Ken Livingstone are united in their opposition.

Ken Livingstone, who has been working with industry groups, said, 'At present most Londoners have access to a local newsagent, which provide a wide choice of newspapers and magazines. These proposals by the OFT are a direct threat to corner shops and to small and independent magazines, as London's choice of diverse publications will be lost.'

The CPBF also put in a submission to the OFT arguing against its draft proposal.

WITHOUT COMMENT

“ PUBLISHERS are held to ever tighter margins: for some Christmas promotions, I was told, Waterstone's is demanding 65-70 per cent discount on all titles, in addition to contributions of £30,000 or more towards marketing costs for each promoted book. Independent publishers, who have generally spent far less than that amount on an advance to their author, are particularly reluctant to take the risk. When you see bigger and bigger piles of fewer and fewer books “ in your shops this is the reason why.

Tim Adams 'War of the Words'
The Observer 18 September 2005

What is the Television Without Frontiers directive?

FREE PRESS readers could be forgiven for not knowing what the directive's importance is. Reporting on the Liverpool conference organised by the UK Presidency and the European Commission, was minimal, for example. But the directive has a big impact on the way national broadcasters and regulators conduct their operations. For example when the directive was first introduced in 1989, it was designed to protect European broadcasting and stipulated that all EU broadcasters should transmit at least 50 per cent of EU originated programmes, 'where practicable'. Those two words were added as a result of intense lobbying by the US President, Ronald Regan and the US film and television industries, with the active support of the UK Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher. It meant that US-originated cartoon channels on satellite and cable could simply ignore the programming requirement.

The directive also includes the right for each government to specify listed sporting events which will be freely available. During the revision of the directive in 1997 and now there has been intense lobbying, with media and advertising groups currently fiercely resisting the extension of the directive into new broadcasting and advertising services.

If the text of a revised directive is finally agreed in 2006 it could still take up to four years for the directive to be incorporated into UK law. There will be flexibility in how the directive is implemented and Ofcom and the DCMS will want 'light touch' regulation to govern TV via new media. Culture minister Tessa Jowell said recently: 'We know we need new regulations to reflect the fact that TV services are now being delivered via the net and mobile phones. But we don't want to use a sledgehammer to crack a nut, as regulation of these platforms will have an enormous impact on how they develop. Creativity and enterprise cannot flourish if they are beset by reams of red tape.'

Between culture and commerce

GRANVILLE WILLIAMS on the recent Liverpool conference on the revision of the Television Without Frontiers directive



Viviane Reding, European Commissioner for Information Society and the Media

'THE listening phrase is over; and the time for work on concrete texts has come,' Viviane Reding, the European Commissioner for Information Society and the Media, declared at the end of the Liverpool conference, Between Culture and Commerce. After over three years of research, lobbying and consultations this was welcome news.

But not for everyone. A number of different

UK-based organisations were clearly unhappy with the scope of the proposed revision, particularly the intention to include both traditional broadcasting (linear) and new audiovisual (non-linear) services such as mobile TV or video on demand over DSL or the internet. David Currie, chair of Ofcom, was sceptical about the case for the extension of the directive's scope. 'We have real concern as to whether it is feasible to adopt a traditional, broadcast-type regulatory model for content delivered on new media platforms,' he said, and urged 'before proceeding to the point of drafting a Directive, the Commission should convene a panel of experts from regulators and governments to consider the practicality of whatever split is agreed...'

The influential Broadband Stakeholder Group (BSG), which advises the government on the roll-out and take-up of broadband services, was withering in its criticism: 'New audio-visual content services, made possible through innovation in digital technology and the internet, should be given time to evolve and develop rather than being shackled by premature and unnecessary regulation intervention by the EU...What the EU must do now is stop the process in its tracks and begin the consultation again.'

BSkyB's James Murdoch, in a poorly-received

speech, argued that for consumers to enjoy the sovereignty that is their right there was less and less need for the services of governments or regulators: 'We need a bonfire of controls. Then commerce will be free to drive our culture forward to the real Golden Age of broadcasting.'

Francisco Pinto Balsemão, chair of the European Publishers Council and a major media owner in Portugal, reinforced this critical stance: '...many of the current assumptions about new regulation are not founded on a sound basis by which to plan the future.' He argued that, for a new generation of content, products and services to develop, 'we need the space and time to allow these markets to evolve without the inhibition of premature intervention and regulation.'

Commissioner Reding clearly distanced herself from those opposed to taking any action to regulate new audiovisual services, but presented a mixed message. She wanted the directive to protect 'shared European values' and pursue 'undisputed public policy objectives, such as the protection of minors or the fight against racial hatred'. However she is also committed to the strategy agreed in Lisbon to roll back 'unnecessary or outdated legislation'.

We can be clear that the Commission will not move to check the growth of media concentration, and its impact on the range and quality of journalism. There will also be a relaxation in the rules on product placement within television programmes. But we will have to wait until the draft texts appear in December to see what precisely the Commissioner is proposing in other areas.

Product placement

IN Europe and the UK there is a major media industry offensive to loosen the rules on product placement. At the moment there is a clear prohibition on the integration of brands and products into television programmes.

Granada was fined £500,000 for blatantly breaking the rules on *This Morning* a few years ago, for example, and in August 2005 Channel 4 was fined £5000 after the energy drink Red Bull was given undue prominence on *Richard and Judy*. One viewer complained that the item was 'an advertisement for Red Bull with celebrity endorsements'. Also the product was recommended four times by an academic, Dr Louise Reyner, but the programme neglected to mention that she had received a research grant of almost £53,000 from Red Bull in 2002.

However a powerful coalition of advertisers, commercial broadcasters and independent producers want the rules changing. Their argument is that the traditional 30-second ad is in decline, as people record programmes and fast-forward the ads, or new ad-skipping

technologies come on stream. The big spenders like Unilever and Procter and Gamble are slashing their traditional advertising budgets and seeking out more cost-effective ways to boost sales. Peter Bazalgette of Endemol predicts an apocalyptic future if the rules are not changed: 'commercial television will eventually become as extinct as the horsedrawn omnibus or the Betamax tape'.

The media regulator Ofcom is now reconsidering the rules.

Should we be concerned? After all, Hollywood studios were bombarded with product placement deals after Reese's Pieces sweets underwent a sales boom after featuring in *E.T.* in 1982. And we can play the game of counting the blatant product placement in a Bond movie.

There are a number of powerful arguments against the increasing domination of broadcasting by advertising. One is that already commercial messages intrude into what were previously public or social spaces uncluttered by advertising, from schools to the sale of public space on streets to outdoor advertising global groups like AC Decaux. A whole battery of new advertising techniques is being used to promote brands, from education packs to sponsored rap songs. But product placement is different from such clearly packaged commercial messages in conventional advertising. We know what an advert is in a magazine or on television, but not with product placement where the advertising message is covert.

Advertising's intrusion into programmes also has a creative impact. The Writers Guild of America has protested that 'branded entertainment' distorts storylines and destroys creativity.

The US experience

IN the USA a campaign by Commercial Alert has highlighted the increasing importance of product placement. In October 2003 the organisation called on the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) and the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) to investigate the practice. Commercial Alert, established by Ralph Nader, argues that increasingly programmes resemble infomercials: 'TV stations pretend that these are just ordinary programmes rather than paid ads. It is an affront to basic honesty.'

The organisation is running a campaign to require disclosure of product placement in all media, including TV, movies, videos, video games, books and 'adversongs'. This has drawn a fierce response from the advertising industry. Letters to the FCC and FTC by the Freedom to Advertise Coalition argued that such proposals would make television 'virtually unwatchable'.

The FTC declined to take action, arguing that product placement is not deceptive because

images do not make any claims. Commercial Alert argues that such a decision is inconsistent with FTC rulings which require newspapers and magazines to disclose that advertising which resembles news copy is, in fact, advertising. The FTC, it argues, is holding newspapers and magazines to a higher standard than TV programmes.

In contrast, FCC Commissioner Jonathan Adelstein, is more combative about what he describes as the 'increasing commercialization of American media' and calls for 'clear and prominent' disclosure of covert commercial pitches. 'People out there are frustrated by what they see as fake news and relentless marketing. Outside of newscasts, product placement is even more rampant...everything from Coke to soap is subliminally hawked in TV programmes,' he said. (Adelstein incidentally was the FCC Commissioner who voted, along with Commissioner Kopps, against the FCC proposal to jettison media ownership).

In 2004 the value of television product placements (or brand casting as some in the industry prefer to describe them) increased by 46.4 per cent over the previous year to \$1.88 billion. For example, at least 250 advertisers wanted to do deals with *Desperate Housewives*; Maserati and Buick cars were amongst the handful chosen. NBC's *The Apprentice* with Donald Trump weaves major advertisers into the story line. Entire episodes have been built around Procter and Gamble's Crest toothpaste or Levi Strauss jeans. Companies pay 'product integration' fees of up to \$2 million and this sort of money gives a large measure of control over how the products are portrayed.

WITHOUT COMMENT

As is the case in Washington, EU regulatory politics mobilizes its own distinctive biases and empowers its own distinctive oligarchies. The premium put on close monitoring of the process of policy creation, combined with the Commission's own heavy reliance on outside specialist expertise, creates powerful biases similar to those in US regulatory politics, in favour of interests with the resources to make the investments in policy monitoring and the hiring of expertise-in short, in favour of business, especially big business.

Michael Moran
The British Regulatory State

Basra and the British Army



STEPHEN DORRIL

THE seizure of two British Special Forces men and subsequent storming of Basra prison to force their release was an unmitigated public relations disaster for the British Army.

In the manner of the British Army's entry into Northern Ireland, where troops were initially received with cups of tea, gratitude for ousting Saddam has turned to hatred. As Adrian Bloomfield reported in *The Daily Telegraph* (3.10.05), the British Army has lost the half-hearted 'hearts and mind' campaign; so much so that the local population no longer believes anything the British say. In addition, the Army has allowed the militiamen to take control of the city and its security police. It was always a myth—the idea of the British having the most sophisticated counter-insurgency army in the world because of its experience during the Troubles, and it now it is one that has now been cruelly exposed.

A number of bloggers have pointed out the similarity between the actions of the two SF men in their Arab disguise and the role of the SAS in Aden and subsequently in Northern Ireland. They have also alluded to the use of 'pseudo gangs' in the pursuit of militiamen. It is true that the so-called 'Aden gang' did import into the North the idea of travelling through Republican areas in civilian dress with detained and turned IRA members to identify Provos. The idea had been to draw out into the open IRA gunmen but, in reality, the strategy led to a number of bizarre shootings on street corners of innocent bystanders. As an SAS enquiry discovered, the uncoordinated 'cowboy operations' of the Military Reconnaissance Force (MRF) were driven by the shambles resulting from the lack of intelli-

gence on the IRA. The same kind of amateurish Army operations now seem to be taking place in Basra.

A better analogy than with events in Northern Ireland is probably Greece in 1945. The British Army had entered Athens with the idea of rooting out the Communist/Left resistance fighters and setting up a pro-West regime. However, fearful of appearing as imperialists, the British under Macmillan decided against cleaning out the civil administration of extremists. This allowed the fascist Security Battalions to infiltrate and take-over the security apparatus, which they used to persecute their opponents. The end result was a vicious civil war. The same process—largely the result of similar British inaction—has allowed the militiamen to control security in Basra as the Army stands aside. Remember the case of the US freelance journalist, Steven Vincent, shot dead in Basra this summer, four days after he wrote an opinion piece in the *New York Times*? He criticised the failure of British forces to act against the increasing control of Shi'ite religious groups in Basra, and cited the role of the Basra police in assassinations.

But, as in Northern Ireland, the Army has tried to control the news agenda with briefings about the role of the Iranians in Basra and in general has used the D-Notice Committee to stifle debate on the role of Special Forces. Despite the claims of the Defence Secretary and Prime Minister, it was not always like this. It is interesting how, over the past twenty years, the SAS has become to be treated as an arm of the intelligence services so that Ministers can announce that it is custom and practice not to answer queries about them.

Reporting on the activities of the Special Forces has become an almost no-go area where occasional disasters make headlines but are quickly replaced by stories of the heroic efforts of the SAS. What actually took place in Basra remains a mystery: had the two members of

the Special Reconnaissance Regiment (previously the 14th Intelligence Company) or SAS been 'shooting at Iraqi forces or trying to plant explosives' as reported by the *Washington Post*? Or were they merely re-supplying colleagues? The reports in the press on the role of the 'sinister' Iranians in Basra may be true but they had the distinct whiff of the old Information Policy briefings from Northern Ireland in the mid-seventies—create as much smoke as possible so that eventually people forget the original story and concentrate on the much more easily controlled story about outside infiltration and influences.

Stephen Dorril is currently writing a history of British Intelligence involvement in Southern and Northern Ireland (1966-2005), 'The dogs in the street say...' His book Blackshirt: Sir Oswald Mosley and British Fascism is due out Spring 2006.

IRAQ: the journalists' death toll

MORE journalists have been killed in Iraq in two years than during the twenty years of conflict in Vietnam, according to Reporters Without Borders. The majority of the 66 dead, compared to 63 in Vietnam, are Iraqis. 36 have been killed since the start of the war.

US forces have killed at least 18 media workers but no one has been charged or punished. US commanders clearly have an interest in blocking images and reports which may be damaging. In some cases journalists are excluded from areas, unless they are embedded, and there is hostility to independent media.

In September, after the death of Waleed Khaled, a Reuters news agency soundman, several radio and television networks, agencies and newspapers set up an association to lobby the US military.

PLATFORM

Digital TV & state abuse of power

ROBERT HENDERSON

THE real reason why we are being forced to go to digital TV is government greed. The decision to turn off the analogue TV signal was made in the hope that the analogue waveband freed up would provide a bonanza similar to that which arose when the G3 wavelengths were sold off to the mobile phone companies.

Digital TV is going to be a costly pain in the neck. Every non-digital TV will have to be fitted with a digital box or replaced with a digital TV. A decent box which will allow full function recording of programmes is currently around £200. All current recording equipment which is not digital will become defunct.

Unlike analogue TVs in many parts of the country it is unlikely that an internal aerial will pick up the digital signal adequately. This will mean the fitting of an expensive aerial to the roof and aerial sockets in every room where a TV is to be used. Portable TVs will become next to impossible to use outside the home and difficult to use in the home because of the external aerial problem which will mean a st cannot be carried around.

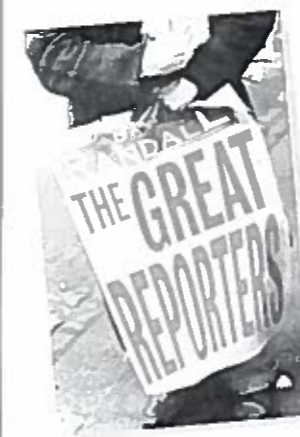
How good the signal will be is debatable. I have a digital radio and even in London where the signal is strong, getting a constant and clear signal is problematic.

The other great problem will be people, especially the old, coming to terms with both fitting the new technology and operating it.

This change is a classic example of a government simply ignoring the wishes and convenience of the public. The democratic way would be to maintain the present situation with both analogue and digital signals until there is no market for the analogue system.

The final question to ask is by what right do governments sell that which belongs to the country as a whole?

BOOK REVIEWS



The Great Reporters by David Randall
Pluto Press £14.99

THIS book would be worth reading just for the account of how Meyer Berger, a *New York Times* reporter, spent six hours interviewing people about a killing spree by a young army veteran which left 12 neighbours and passers-by dead. Berger then went back to the paper and in two and a half hours wrote a 4,000-word account for the first edition, with not a word changed by the editor. He won a Pulitzer Prize for the report.

There are other revelations. 'I doubt if one journalism student in 10,000 knows his name,' Randall writes about another of his selections,



A Matter of Opinion
by Victor Navasky
New Press £16.95

VICTOR Navasky became editor of *The Nation* magazine in 1978 and its publisher in 1995. He draws on this experience, and before

that on the *New York Times* magazine, to create a well-written, wonderful book, packed full of insights and anecdotes about politics, publishing and the difficulties of sustaining *The Nation* magazine.

Navasky's comments on journals of opinion, for example, present a lucid overview of their history and importance (including an informal interview with Jurgen Habermas).

The book is international in its scope. Navasky was involved in a

J.A. MacGahan. The impact of MacGahan's reports from Bulgaria on the Turkish atrocities after a Bulgarian uprising against the Turks, which appeared in the *London Daily News* in the summer of 1876 is well described. It was news reporting which literally changed the map of Europe. Russia launched a war against Turkey in the spring of 1877 and the nations of Bulgaria, Serbia, Montenegro and Romania came into being.

It is a difficult, indeed perilous, task to select the 'thirteen best journalists who ever lived' and one could disagree with some of the journalists chosen—nine Americans and four Britons. But that is not to deny David Randall's enthusiasm and clarity in presenting his selection.

A couple of complaints. Reading the book whets the appetite to find out more about some of the journalists but there is no bibliography to help the reader. Also, whilst Randall quotes some chunks of text by the journalists, it would have been good to have complete articles to read by them.

That said, if you want to find out more about George Seldes, Nelly Bly or Ernie Pyle this is the book.

brave attempt to set up InterNation, a worldwide network of progressive investigative journalists who would collaborate with each other. 'The process of putting the network together,' he writes, 'had its own rewards.' He mentions how, in Thailand, a United States Information Agency office organised a breakfast in Bangkok for sixteen English-speaking Thai journalists. The officer showed Navasky 'a thick mimeographed dossier that included the name of every significant journalist in Thailand (including Americans and Europeans), with a paragraph or two on each' containing political profiles, reliability of reporting, whether he/she could be trusted, and so on. Navasky muses, 'I hadn't realised that American diplomats kept track of the press so systematically.'

A fascinating book, highly recommended.

SEWN UP

New Report Argues Media Policy Excludes Public

DES Freedman of Goldsmiths College has produced some strong evidence exposing the serious democratic deficit in the media policy-making process in Britain.* The report's main conclusion is that media policy-making is becoming more complex, involving an expanded set of stakeholders, yet the real decision making powers seem to reside with a virtuous circle of politicians, special advisers and trusted experts. Key policy makers pass effortlessly between the BBC strategy department, Downing Street or the DCMS and Ofcom. For example, Ed Richards was appointed by John Birt at the BBC to develop strategy; he then went to Downing Street, where he helped draw up the Communications Act which created Ofcom, where Richards then became a partner, being replaced at Downing Street by his friend James Purnell, who then became an MP and is now minister for broadcasting, and his vacant strategy seat in No 10 is now filled in part by Lord Birt, Tony Blair's blue-sky thinker.

The lobbying interests of big media also exert a powerful influence over media policy just by being here - politicians rely on the media to

project them and their message. As Freedman points out, BSkyB met government officials six times during the passage of the Communications Act.

The report's findings, based on interviews with 40 leading policy-makers, raise uncomfortable questions about the value of consultation processes. The 2003 Communications Act was driven by a handful of figures inside Downing Street. One person interviewed said: 'My sense of it was that there was an agenda being run by a very small tightly-knit clique of people, who were to some extent prepared to listen, but only within the very narrow bounds of their own idea of what should be done,' Freedman argues that whilst the public is invited to make its voice heard in consultations and opinion polls the key policy decisions are made by government insiders, often in concert with industry lobbyists, and sometimes against the wishes of the public.

One other important finding in the report is to do with the emphasis on hard data and 'evidence-based research'. The report argues that this is one means of marginalising the public and media reform organisations with limited research resources: the public policy process is safeguarded 'for the economists,

lawyers and executives who are in a prime position to furnish the sort of information that policy-makers are demanding'.

The report, extremely timely and relevant, deserves wide public discussion.

* How level is the playing field? An analysis of the UK media-policy making process

NEW, REVISED PUBLICATION

Keeping Broadcasting Public: The BBC and the 2006 Charter by Tom O'Malley



Copies can be ordered from the CPBF National Office.

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