

# BBC White Paper: why the delay?



Murdoch, in speeches and meetings with the Culture minister, Tessa Jowell, has argued that Ofcom should oversee the BBC.

In addition, other aspects of the Charter Review, such as the level of the licence fee for the next ten years, are being

attacked. The national press was unremittingly hostile (with the exception of a Guardian leader) on 12 October, when it reported on the presentation of the BBC's licence fee submission to the Commons Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee by Director General Mark Thompson and BBC Chair Michael Grade. The Murdoch press led the attack, with The Times describing the BBC as 'a taxpayer-funded marauding monopoly'. The chair of the Select Committee, Tory MP John Whittingdale, accused the BBC of wanting to wallow in a 'swimming pool of cash' and Nigel Evans MP described the licence fee as a 'poll tax'.

Some commentators are playing down the reasons for the delay in the White Paper's publication suggesting that the DCMS is busy with other controversial policy issues. But it is clear that the scale of the attacks has had an impact on the Charter Review, and that is why the campaign to defend the BBC needs to step up a gear. We believe there is a gap between the views of some politicians and the media, and the attitude of the general public, towards the BBC. It is easy headline stuff to attack the BBC but the public recognise that for all its faults the BBC is a vital public institution, and in a world of ever-increasing

commercialisation, an important protected broadcasting space.

It is vital for all of us to ensure that we contact our MPs about these issues. We must make our views known and get our voices heard. If you want the arguments to do this get hold of our new, updated pamphlet, *Keeping Broadcasting Public: the BBC and the 2006 Charter Review*. Also sign up to our website specifically devoted to campaigning for the future of public service broadcasting at

[www.cpbf.org.uk](http://www.cpbf.org.uk)



Finally it is vital to build the widest support for the conference on the White Paper which will now be held on the revised date of Saturday 18 March (see p8).

## New editor for Free Press

I HAVE edited this journal since September 1992 but this is the last issue I will be editing. From issue 150 responsibility passes into the capable hands of Julie-ann Davies. I have enjoyed the role, and want to thank all the people who have contributed articles and enabled me to produce the journal over the years.

**GRANVILLE WILLIAMS**

THE BAD news is that the BBC White Paper, originally planned for publication in either December or early January, is now delayed until spring 2006. The reason? So that it can undergo a substantial revision.

We hinted in FP148 that a number of different forces were coalescing in their opposition to some of the policy proposals contained in the Green Paper produced in March this year. Ofcom, BSkyB, the House of Lords Select Committee report on Charter Review (see p8) have all forcefully challenged the proposal for a BBC Trust. BSkyB chief executive, James

# A pathetic judgement

## JULIAN PETLEY on the PCC handling of our complaint

ON 2 August Granville Williams, Barry White and I wrote to the Press Complaints Commission, on behalf of the Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom, about the front page story of the *Express*, 27 July 2005. Specifically, we complained that the headline 'Bombers are all spongeing (sic) asylum seekers' was inaccurate as, at the time that this was written, the identity of two of the suspected bombers was unknown. Furthermore, the headline was inaccurate even if it was taken to apply only to the two alleged bombers (Muktar Said Ibrahim and Yasin Hassan Omar) who had been identified at the time of writing, since neither was an asylum seeker. Ibrahim arrived at 14 in 1992 as a child of refugees fleeing Eritrea and was given exceptional leave to remain; he applied to become a British citizen in November 2003 and was granted a passport in September 2004. Omar, meanwhile, arrived at 11 as an unaccompanied minor from Somalia; he was also granted exceptional leave to remain, and, in May 2000, indefinite leave to remain. The inaccuracy about their being 'asylum seekers' was also repeated in the first line of the article, which stated that: 'The suicide bombers who tried to murder scores of Britons were asylum seekers who raked in more than £40,000 in state handouts, it emerged yesterday'.

A further inaccuracy concerned the repeated failure to put the words 'alleged' or 'suspected' before each and every use of the words 'bomber' and 'killer' throughout the text—the *Express*, like nearly every other newspaper in Britain, committed a serious inaccuracy by simply ignoring the plain fact that, under British law, suspects are innocent until proven guilty.

We also added: 'This is not a third party complaint. Racist, hate-filled and inflammatory articles such as this endanger the lives of all of us by helping to convince a tiny but

dangerous minority of British Muslims that the majority population loathe them, thus, in their eyes, helping to justify their attacks on that population. We are complaining as three of those thus endangered'.

On 4 August we received an acknowledgement which stated, *inter alia*, that: 'The editor of the *Daily Express* is currently a member of the Press Complaints Commission. However, as his newspaper is the subject of your complaint he will of course not take part in any discussion or consideration of the complaint by the Commission'.

By 30 September, having heard nothing from the PCC, we wrote again, to be told on 4 October that: 'The Commission is currently considering this matter and we hope to be able to send you its decision in the very near future'. This turned out to be 15 November, when we discovered that our complaint had been rejected. True to form, the Commission dragged up the usual excuse that the article's subjects had not themselves objected to it.

However, their second, and more significant, get-out concerned the relationship of the offending headline to the article itself. Thus they pointed out that: 'While the Commission had previously censured newspapers for front-page headlines that have been insufficiently clarified or qualified by the following article—particularly by text that appeared within the body of the newspaper—it did not consider that that this example raised a similar breach of the code. The terms of the headline were clarified in the body of the article on the front page—that the two men had previously been 'given sanctuary' by Britain and had therefore been involved in seeking asylum—and the Commission considered that readers would not have been misled as a result'. However, as noted above, the article itself, as well as the headline, claimed that the men were asylum seekers. Furthermore, the PCC's suggestion that being 'given sanctuary' and seeking asylum

are synonymous is both specious and, in itself, highly inaccurate. It is also remarkably hypocritical, coming as it does from a body which, in October 2003, issued a statement on refugees and asylum seekers which warned that: 'The Commission is concerned that editors should ensure that journalists covering these issues are mindful of the problems that can occur and take care to avoid misleading or distorted terminology'. The PCC also defended the *Express* on the ground that it was 'expressing a view about particular people connected with a recent news incident', which, since the item purported to be a news story, and a front page one at that, would appear to be completely at variance with the Commission's own Code of Practice, which states that: 'Newspapers, whilst free to be partisan, must distinguish clearly between comment, conjecture and fact'.

The lessons for editors from this grubby exercise in excusing the inexcusable are clear for all to see: as far as the PCC is concerned, inaccurate headlines are fine and dandy as long as the inaccuracies are repeated—not to say embroidered—in the main body of the text. And editorials masquerading as front page news get the green light too.

But how come it took the PCC more than three months to come up with such intelligence-insulting sophistry and mind-boggling circumlocution? As the PCC's letter of 4 October put it: 'The investigation of some cases takes more time than others'. But perhaps it should have added: 'Especially when the complaint concerns a paper edited by a member of the PCC itself'. One can only guess at the probable shenanigans inside the PCC which led up to this tardy, pathetic and threadbare judgement, but if ever a case gave impetus to the growing campaign to have the PCC declared a public authority for the purposes of the Freedom of Information Act, and thus to have its inner workings opened up to public scrutiny, then this is it.

## CITY SLICKERS TRIAL

THE reports on the City Slicker trial make fascinating reading but it must be a painful experience for Piers Morgan to read the reports in *Press Gazette*, the trade magazine for journalists. After all, Piers Morgan owns the magazine. The *City Slicker*, James Hipwell, is on trial for a share ramping scam designed to encourage *Daily Mirror* readers to invest in shares he and another *City Slicker*, Anil Bhoyrul, had recently purchased.

Presumably to avoid any embarrassment to journalists on the magazine they do not report the trial. The two reports which appeared on 4 and 18 November are by Melvyn Howe of the Press Association. The court heard that Piers Morgan, then *Daily Mirror* editor, bought £67,000 worth of shares in Alan Sugar's computer company

Viglen the day before they were tipped by the *City Slickers*. Morgan was cleared of any wrongdoing by an in-house investigation by City law firm, Lovells, though. But James Hipwell said that he was approached by the newspaper's in-house lawyer, Martin Cruddace (who also by coincidence purchased shares tipped by *City Slickers*!) and Tina Weaver, the newspaper's deputy editor, to 'frustrate the Lovells investigation'. 'I needed to make it clear to Lovells' solicitors that Piers had not seen the Viglen story before it went into the newspaper,' he said.

Hipwell explained why he did not realise his share ramping activities might break the PCC Code of Conduct which forbids journalists buying or selling shares they have either just written about or planned to do so in the future. Hipwell said that because



Piers Morgan's painful experience

his pre-Mirror journalistic background lay exclusively in magazines he had not been familiar with the workings of the PCC. Well that's cleared that confusion up.



## PULPED FICTION- OR PUTTING THE CLOCKS BACK

### MICK GOSLING

It's a steamy 7 August 2004 night in towns and cities across the country. Just past 9pm. The kids are out on the streets. Dixon of dotty Ofcom sends them home where the youngsters sip a cup of cocoa and go to bed.

Parents are now able to snuggle up on the couch at 9.30pm to watch Quentin Tarantino's cinematic masterpiece *Pulp Fiction*, which contains "a combination of seriously offensive language, graphic violence and drug abuse" in the reassuring belief that their youngsters are not being exposed to such material because the BBC changed its mind and screened the film at 9.30pm rather than 9.10pm.

Meanwhile the kids are upstairs watching the same film on their own television or using a DVD, the internet or whatever other device is at hand to watch the film.

Ofcom does not inhabit the real world. It found the BBC's scheduling of *Pulp Fiction* at 9.10pm in breach of the code covering the 9 o'clock watershed. Obviously Ofcom has some difficulty reading the clock. The BBC protested in vain for 14 months that there was no reason for Ofcom to reach the decision it did.

Ofcom's reasoning on the watershed is tortuous and dangerous and kicks out the legs from underneath it by stating that 'the content should be suitable for the time of transmission' and 'such intense material is not normally expected so soon after the watershed...given the strong adult content from the start.'

Leaving aside the subjective judgements involved here, what Ofcom has done is make the watershed a moveable feast. And moveable only backwards.

The implications are dangerous. The schedulers will be worried. Take for example *Troy* which featured near full frontal nudity and graphic violence in its first ten minutes and was screened at 9pm. (If nine people complain, as happened with *Pulp*

*Fiction* one can guess Ofcom's response—ah well, this is historical violence. That's always more acceptable than lived violence in contemporary society)

If the schedulers are worried, what happens with the commissioning editors? Consciously or subconsciously are they more likely to accept less challenging drama? And in case anyone thinks this is paranoia just look at what has happened with BBC news post-Hutton.

Then come the production companies. Will there not be a temptation for them to present more timid proposals for drama programmes and leave us with yet more police, detective, hospital and dead body dramas, good-if totally inaccurate—as many of them are?

The danger lies in creeping self-censorship and that is the most pernicious censorship of all because it is not visible.

Ofcom in its adjudication on *Pulp Fiction* stated that it had 'no issue' with the BBC about 'the editorial and cultural merits of the film.' Its ruling was based on complaints from just nine, that's right, nine, people. As a result many in the broadcast TV industry will be looking over their shoulders. Evening all.

# Unworthy Victims?

**JULIE-ANN DAVIES on the use of chemical weapons in Iraq**

THE American-led siege of the Iraqi city of Fallujah began on 7 November 2004. It continued for two weeks with estimates of over 1,200 insurgents killed and up to 250,000 civilians displaced.

Hospitals, schools, power supplies and water lines were destroyed in the city. Reports filed from the area were scant. Most journalists present were embedded with troops and their movements were tightly controlled. Allegations that American forces were using chemical weapons in Fallujah were widely ignored by the mainstream media.

On 8 November 2005, a year and a day after the US military entered Fallujah, Italian state broadcaster RAI aired *Fallujah, The Hidden Massacre*. The programme claimed the Americans had used a substance similar to Napalm and white phosphorus shells against civilians. The footage included harrowing images of women and children who had been burned alive.

The United States denied the allegations. On 15 November the American Ambassador in London, Robert Tuttle, wrote to *The Independent* claiming: 'US forces participating in operation Iraqi Freedom continue to use appropriate, lawful and legitimate weapons against legitimate targets. US forces do not use Napalm or phosphorus as weapons.'

The time-honoured technique of smearing the messenger was deployed. Pentagon spokesman Todd Vician emphatically denied the use of chemical weapons in Iraq and said 'People seeking to discredit the US find it useful to invent the false accusation that the US is using weapons of this sort.'

However, the US was forced into an abrupt climb-down when presented with evidence from one of its own publications. An article published in the March 2005 issue of *Field Artillery* gave a detailed account of white phosphorus being used directly against insurgents in Fallujah. This directly contradicted the statements made by the US military that white phosphorus was only been used as a flare to illuminate the battlefield.

The story, dormant for over a year, reignited and lit up the internet. On 16 November Lieutenant-Colonel Venable told the BBC that white phosphorus was used as an incendiary weapon against enemy combatants. 'This is not the first time that the US has been forced to defend its use of incendiary or chemical weapons in Iraq.'

On 22 March 2003 CNN carried reports that American forces had used Napalm at Safwan Hill, close to the Iraqi border. Initially, the US denied these claims but later admitted to their use of

Mark 77 firebombs.

Facing an outcry the US was taking refuge in semantics. Napalm and the firebombs are virtually identical. The only difference is that petrol, used in Napalm, has been replaced with jet fuel in the Mark 77's. The effects remain horrific.

It is obvious that the US government has been deliberately misleading the media and the public about its conduct in Iraq. It is undeniable that this makes it more difficult for journalists to discover the truth. But this is only part of the problem. The mainstream media appears, in this case, to be extremely reluctant to deviate from the official, governmental line.

Early in 2005 a medical team sent to Fallujah by the Iraqi interim government held a press conference to publicise their findings. They confirmed that 'burning chemicals' were used by American forces during the attack. That conference was attended by over 20 major national and international news organisations but none of these reported on the event.

On 20 November 2005, in an article in the *Sunday Telegraph*, Toby Harnden revealed he witnessed US forces using white phosphorus to target insurgents in Fallujah. Yet his original report of the event reads somewhat differently. Written on 9 November, 2004 the piece 'All-out assault on Fallujah' says: 'White phosphorus shells lit up the sky as armour drove through the breach and sent flaming material on to suspect insurgent haunts.'

The use of white phosphorus to illuminate battle-zones or to generate smoke-screen to cover troop movements is uncontroversial. It is only when it is used against human targets, as revealed in Harnden's second article, that the legality of its use becomes questionable. Harnden's initial account of the event, written while embedded with US forces, was unlikely to upset the military.

The real scandal behind this story is that it has taken so long for the mainstream media to cover it. We were told it was necessary to go to war with Iraq because Saddam Hussein possessed chemical and biological weapons that he could use against us. Saddam was, rightly, portrayed as monstrous for gassing the Kurds in Halabja, a fact that was widely reported. Yet America's use of Napalm-like weapons that can burn to the bone has, so far, received significantly less coverage.

Weapons make no distinction between civilians and combatants—they treat all their victims with equal cruelty. However, the international mainstream media seems, in this case at least, to believe that some victims are more worthy of their attention than others.

## US v the rest

**GARY HERMAN on the attempt to challenge US dominance of the Internet**

THE recent and grandiosely titled World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS), organised by the United Nations, strained mightily and brought forth the proverbial mouse. After three years of planning and pipe-meetings, and two full-scale conferences, the 50 or so world leaders at the second conference in Tunis agreed to have a few more meetings. A new organisation called the 'Internet Governance Forum' will be formed in order to continue to discuss what the UN calls 'further internationalisation of Internet governance' in a variety of more-or-less exotic locations around the world, starting in the middle of next year.

### What does it all mean?

Enthusiasts have long proclaimed cyberspace a 'functioning anarchy' perpetuating the myth that no-one controls the internet. The truth is different. Since its very beginnings in the 1960s, the internet has been a creature of government and the big technology businesses whose relationship with government is symbiotically close if not actually cosy. Specifically, the organisations controlling the internet have been the US Department of Defence and the Department of Commerce along with an informal cartel of research institutes like the National Centre for Supercomputer Applications and companies like IBM and AT&T.

The control is exercised largely through the development, maintenance and administration of technical standards—the key intellectual property of the communications age. The US Government does not tend to interfere directly but it has used its own purchasing power and its ability to set or adopt standards, fund research projects and manage the economic environment to direct the development of the internet.

The result has been to fuel around a third of all US economic growth in recent years through the success of companies like Cisco, Sun, SBC (formerly South Western Bell) and more recently Google and eBay. Since 1998, the body responsible for controlling internet standards (notably the domain names which allow you to find a web site or send an email) has been the esoterically named Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN).

The development of practical global networking standards, spearheaded by the internet, left most of the rest of the globe out in the cold. Working through the International Standards Organisation (ISO) and the world's oldest international agency, the International

Telecommunications Union (ITU), the UN and the European Commission became mired in legislative process whenever they tried to respond to frighteningly rapid changes in the technology market. Since the US Government agreed to commercialise the internet in 1991—allowing companies to buy and sell domain names—the UN and the EC have attempted to exert some control on the process. The WSIS represents the most recent of these attempts.

Despite protestations to the contrary, the whole WSIS process is not primarily about the digital divide, freedom of expression or content regulation. These are vital issues, touted by UN agencies and NGOs in the run-up to the final WSIS conference in Tunis, but they cannot be addressed without talking about control. In the event, they were sidelined.

The ostensible reason was George W. Bush's reversal of Bill Clinton's position on ICANN. In 1998, Clinton promised that ICANN would become independent by 2006 and therefore susceptible to international management. Two days before 4 July this year, the Department of Commerce announced that it would keep



US government keeps ultimate control

control of the domain name system indefinitely.

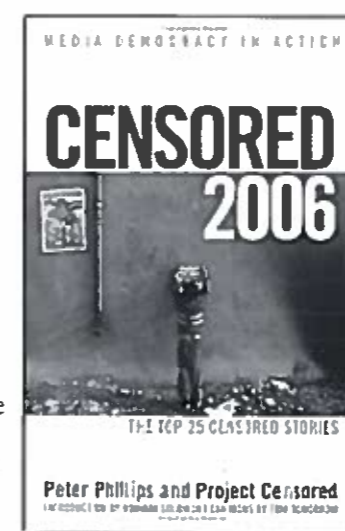
For the world leaders congregating in North Africa, this was a slap in the face—and one that overshadowed practically any other topic of debate. Ultimate control of the internet would remain in the hands of the US Government—a situation which, in any other international medium, would be deemed intolerable. But the US has all the aces. All anyone can do is keep talking.

**Censored 2006—The Top 25 Censored Stories by Peter Phillips and Project Censored. Seven Stories Press £12.99**

CENSORED 2006 gives us the most censored stories of 2004 and 2005 in the United States. It is a vast undertaking, involving over 250 people and managed

through the Department of Sociology in the School of Social Sciences at Sonoma State University. The edition is dedicated to journalist Gary Webb whose exposures of the CIA Contra drugs links was an important story adding to the evidence of corruption in the US national security state. He became the target of one of the most ferocious media attacks on any reporter in recent history. His work cost him his career and eventually his life.

It is difficult to pick out any of the 25 stories for particular mention. All are enlightening (and many frightening) and require careful reading. But examples of media coverage on Iraq are particularly relevant today. The chapters on



Fallujah and the civilian death toll and how independent journalists are paying for their reporting from Iraq with their lives and their jobs, remind us of the power the military exercises in its attempt to manage the news.

In addition there is a section devoted to '2006 Runners-Up'—short tasters on some news stories that did not quite make the top 25. There is a chapter giving updates of previously reported censored news—'Déjà vu', the most disturbing here is the report entitled 'Haiti: Diplomacy by Death Squads', the story behind the US backed overthrow of President Jean-Bertrand Aristide in February 2004.

Other chapters critically examine the 11 September Commission Report; Greg Palast writes on the professional lynching of Dan Rather and there are chapters on PR Watch's 'Spins of the Year' and an annual report on censorship worldwide from Index on Censorship. Finally the link between the media and corporate America is exposed in a chapter which examines the relationships between broadcast news media and US and international corporate boards. It lists the ten major media companies and their boards of directors and shows how they interlock with corporate America and other major US institutions.

Censored 2006 is essential reading for anyone who cares about the state of the media today.

You can visit the Project Censored Guide (with more than 1,000 independent media sources) at: [www.projectcensored.org](http://www.projectcensored.org)

**BARRY WHITE**

# Satisfying the advertisers

**JONATHAN HARDY** analyses the policy issues behind product placement

As FP 148 reported, rules on product placement are being reviewed. We're awaiting a consultation from Ofcom promised when it launched its new Broadcasting Code in May. Currently UK regulation prohibits product placement, defined as 'the inclusion of, or a reference to, a product or service within a programme in return for payment or other valuable consideration', and restricts commercial references within programmes. The EC Television Directive outlaws 'surreptitious advertising' but the Commission, and Ofcom, favour new rules to permit product placement.

In the US product placement is largely unregulated and expanding rapidly. A recent show *The Contender* featured more than 7,500 instances of product placement in just six months.

By contrast, in the UK, the principle of clear separation between programmes and advertising was established in the 1954 Television Act and has been maintained since, for domestic programmes. This core principle of separation is at stake if, as expected, product placement is formally legitimised in Europe.

## WITHOUT COMMENT

“WE KNOW firsthand how the story gets short-changed every time a reality show gets taken over by an advertiser. We're the ones forced to put in long hours just to figure out how we're going to embed that can of soda into the story line eight more times before the final episode.”

Writers Guild of America

Those now favouring relaxation of rules represent a powerful convergence of interests from advertisers, ad agencies, commercial broadcasters and content providers (with the partial exception of public service broadcasters). As the European Association of Communication Agencies (EACA) put it:

'Product placement, and other forms of so-called "surreptitious" advertising will, we believe, grow in importance as advertisers seek ever more innovative and creative ways of promoting their brands. We believe that this is a good thing, representing as it does a potential source of revenue to broadcasters-revenue that should lead to an improvement in the choice and variety of programmes available to viewers.'

Lobbyists recognise that the principle of separation is a 'roadblock' so they have marshalled arguments to shift from separation to identification. Product placement, they argue, should be permitted but identified so that it is no longer 'surreptitious', although even these 'safeguards' should not be extended to interactive, non-linear media. The European Commission agrees and debate is shifting to how identification should take place, in opening or end credits, in listings magazines, or in 'linked' websites.

These powerful interests have huge resources to influence policy while opposing voices are weaker. Of 72 submissions made to the EC paper on product placement, most represented commercial media businesses (30) advertising (7), governments or regulators (12). Some fifteen responses came from NGOs including the CPBF and VLV. However, there is no active transnational consumer voice to match industry on the issue. Likewise, public participation has been negligible. Yet there is evidence of public concern, despite large gaps in research, concerning advertising clutter, interruption of programming, the amount of advertising and invasiveness. Ofcom's recent

Communication Markets survey showed a fall in consumer acceptance of all forms of advertising on TV.

The public have also not been informed. Reporting of the proposed rule changes has been limited, confined to broadsheets and specialist trade media. In the last five months, across all UK print media 317 articles mentioned product placement, indicating the growing currency of the topic. However the number mentioning proposed changes in UK or EC regulation of product placement is much smaller. 48 articles appeared, 20 in the national press (plus eight online only), 14 in specialist trade media, one regional newspaper, four other magazines and one news agency report.

The prevailing argument that consumers will be protected by identification, displaces broader concerns about editorial integrity, artistic integrity and the risks of ongoing distortion of programme agendas and editorial content for commercial purposes, 'promoting the promotionally friendly', as William Hoynes puts it. Such concerns have received a measure of support from the UK government which now urges 'caution in abandoning the principle of separation to allow product placement'. It identifies a number of significant risks including that 'broadcasters' editorial decisions...could be skewed in order to maximise the opportunities for placing products for promotional purposes'. Further, 'viewers may not know when they are being sold to, as identification at the beginning of the programme, as is suggested, could either be missed or forgotten by the time the promotion takes place'.

Such endorsement does not shift the realities of policy influence, nor the challenge of intervening in an 'evidence based' process dominated by 'market' impact analyses with minimal research on public understanding or attitudes. However, differences between the UK government and Ofcom can be built upon, and alliances forged with consumer groups and others to contest an irreversible slide towards US-style commercial integration.

**Tragedy and Farce: How the American Media Sell Wars, Spin Elections, and Destroy Democracy** by John Nichols and Robert W. McChesney The New Press £13.99

This book takes part of its title from a text by James Madison, one of America's Founding Fathers: 'A popular Government without popular information or the means of acquiring it, is but a Prologue to a Farce or a Tragedy or perhaps both.' The authors have written an impassioned, well-documented analysis of the failures of US media over two crucial tests—the US invasion and occupation of Iraq and the 2004 presidential election. These two case studies form part of a wider critique which provides the structural and historical context for the deep crisis in US media.

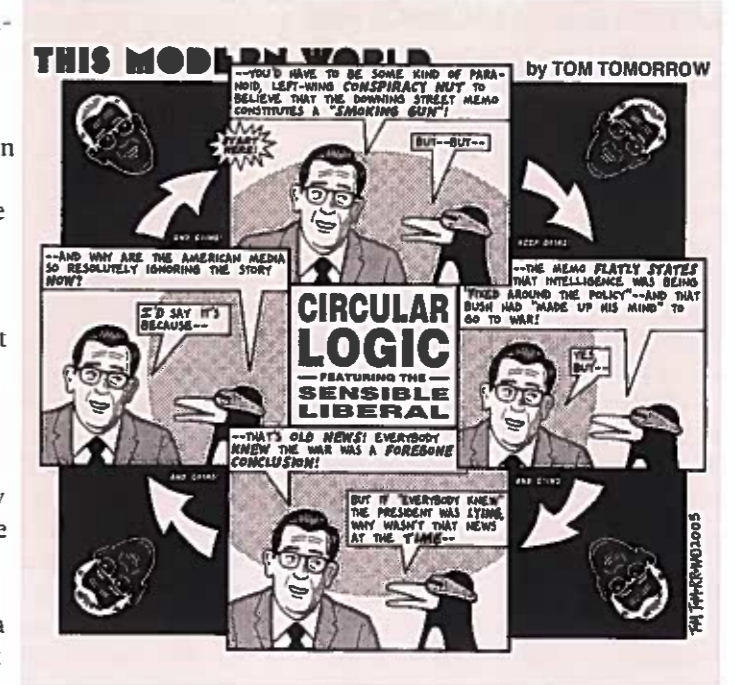
One telling example is taken from March 2003 when George W. Bush prepared to launch a war against an international backdrop of unprecedented global opposition. He held a press conference at which 'the elite of the Washington press corps asked him not a single probing question about the flimsy case that had been made for war, nor about its likely costs, nor about anything akin to an exit strategy'. The authors point out, 'When

America's contemporary media system faced the greatest challenge for which Madison and others had warned it must be prepared—questioning the executive before the onset of war—it failed.'

The evidence John Nichols and Bob McChesney assemble is deeply disturbing but 'the point of detailing the damage done to democracy by a media system that cannot be trusted

to cover wars and elections is to get citizens mad enough to demand the changes that will allow a more responsible and democracy-sustaining media to develop'.

Both authors have played a central and inspirational role in the Free Press Media Reform movement in the States, which has created 'an aroused and energised public'. The authors believe



that 'we now have a historic window of opportunity to make media reform an issue in our country's political life'.

This book deserves a wide readership. It also comes with the added bonus—a text interspersed with Tom Tomorrow's wonderful, quirky cartoons, *This Modern World*. Highly recommended.

GW

## John Pilger

**SUE MEW**

THE season of on-stage events and classic screenings in celebration of ITV50—50 years of independent British television—opened at the National Film Theatre on 6 November with investigative journalist, war correspondent, author and award-making documentary film-maker, John Pilger, in conversation with Julian Petley, Professor of Film and Television Studies, Brunel University and co-chair of the CPBF.

John Pilger's reflections on his work and his career were preceded by a screening of two of his most provocative TV reports—*Year Zero: The Silent Death of Cambodia* (ATV 1979) and *Breaking the Silence: Truth and Lies in the War on Terror* (Carlton, 2003). *Year Zero* was the first report to emerge from Cambodia following the destruction inflicted by Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger and the eventual fall of the

Pol Pot regime, and led to £19m in relief funds being raised. The more recent *Breaking the Silence* engages with the way in which the events of 11 September 2001 now dominate almost everything we watch, read and hear and questions the real aims of the current 'war on terror' and the rise of a rapacious, imperial power that dare not speak its name because it is 'our terrorism'.

In a world in which the distinction between fact and fiction, truth and lies are increasingly obfuscated through sound-bites, cover-up, duplicity and political spin, Pilger's work represents a timely reminder of the power and role of investigative journalism at its best—a journalism that is not susceptible to manipulation, deception or intimidation and continues to ask the right questions in search of truth and to challenge the 'story-telling', and 'silences' of those in power that often constitute the 'official version' of events. Pilger's latest book *Tell Me Know Lies* (Vintage,

2004), is an excellent testament to the triumphs of investigative journalism and political dissent—a tradition of which he is and remains an international figurehead—and includes selected writings by Martha Gellhorn, Robert Fisk, Paul Foot, Seamus Milne, Seymour Hersh and many others.

Pilger's work serves to remind us all of a tenacious and courageous journalism that has become increasingly marginalised by the demands of a 24/7 news culture that has become increasingly stage-managed by spin-doctors, PR advisers and corporate interests. The role of the media in democratic society and journalistic standards within the news media is a public issue and one that is of public interest. Pilger's work over the past 40 years reminds us of the standards we should expect from the news media both now and in the future.

The ITV50 season celebrating 50 Years of Independent Television continues at the NFT from 6 November—29 December 2005.

## LORDS BACK LICENCE FEE

**TOM O'MALLEY**

THE debate over the BBC Charter was given a fresh twist in November when a House of Lords Committee, chaired by Lord (Norman Fowler), issued its report. Whilst not attacking the whole concept of marketised broadcasting and its main advocate, Ofcom, the report makes some points similar to those presented in the CPBF's evidence to the Committee.

Like the CPBF it calls for the Charter to be replaced by an Act of Parliament. This would make the whole process more transparent and relatively more accountable. We want the licence fee to continue to 2017; so does the Committee. It wants limits on inflation plus increases. While we don't want increases to rocket, we do want the BBC to be in a position to compete with its rivals who will be raking in profit at a rate which is likely to outstrip even modest inflation plus increases.

Like the CPBF the report rejects using the licence fee to fund digital roll out. This will hit low income families, and create ammunition for Murdoch and his like to attack the BBC. You can guess what a future Sun headline would look like: 'BBC Licence Fee Hike!' No explanation would be given to the effect that the licence fee

would be funding the infrastructure that the commercial sector wants developed. In fact it is the commercial sector that should pay for the roll out, not the licence fee payers.

However the report was strongly critical of the plan for a BBC Trust to replace the governors: 'This model fails to separate governance and regulation of the BBC, allowing the corporation to remain judge and jury in its own case. Ofcom should provide independent regulation of the BBC's activities.' The idea of Ofcom regulating the BBC is one which the CPBF strongly opposes.

The report raises important issues, but we cannot just let these be decided by the Lords, Murdoch or the government. We must act to put pressure on our MPs to get a sensible settlement for the BBC and to push back the boundaries of commercialism in UK mass communications.

## CONFERENCE TO PRESS FOR STRONGER BBC

TRADE unionists and media campaigners demanding a strong BBC, independent both of government and commercial pressures, are to join forces in a major conference on Saturday 18 March.

The conference, Keep Broadcasting Public: BBC Charter Renewal, is a joint

initiative of the TUC, Federation of Entertainment Unions and the CPBF. It will be hosted by the TUC at Congress House in London and opened by TUC general secretary Brendan Barber. Originally planned for January the event was rescheduled after it was announced that the government's White Paper on BBC Charter Renewal will not now be published until February.

Senior figures from the government and the BBC have been invited to present their vision of how the BBC should operate for the next 10 years under a renewed Royal Charter. They can expect a tough debate with unions and campaigners concerned that extensive job cuts and restructuring at the BBC, the farming out of more production and threatened 'top-slicing' of the licence fee could leave the Corporation a shadow of its former self. A campaign will be mapped out to convince ministers, MPs and the public that the BBC should be maintained as the flagship of public service broadcasting-serving all sections of the community.

The conference is open to CPBF members, union delegates and individuals—£10 pp/£7 concessions. Refreshments & a sandwich lunch included. To register contact the CPBF office, 23 Orford Road, London E17 9NL tel.020 8521 5932. For regular updates visit the CPBF website.

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CPBF web site: [www.cpbf.org.uk](http://www.cpbf.org.uk)  
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