

The moral mirror

John Pilger says journalists' 'objectivity' and 'impartiality' have become code for profound establishment bias



one-sided onslaught on an already stricken nation. "It is obviously, without a doubt, a vindication of [American strategy]," reported the BBC's Nicholas Witchell. Indeed, "vindication" was used repeatedly by BBC (and ITN) reporters and news readers. Mark Mardell on Newsnight made what became a declaration popular among his colleagues: "It has been a vindication for him." He was referring to Tony Blair, of course. Standing in Downing Street, the BBC's then political editor Andrew Marr applauded Blair, stating that the prime minister had been proven "conclusively right" on two points: "that [the Americans and British] would be able to take Baghdad without a bloodbath, and that in the end Iraqis would be celebrating." The diametric opposite was true. Thousands of Iraqis had already died in an assault called appropriately Shock and Awe. The toll is now well in excess of 100,000. And the televised celebrations were largely fake. According to the British government's own polling, a majority of the Iraqi people want the invaders out.

Objectivity, impartiality, the known truth that Blair and Bush had lied about weapons of mass destruction and that the

Forget the lies. Forget the law. Forget the truth. It's a BBC fact.

There are many structural iniquities in our so-called free media: the erosion of proper regulation, the growth of rapacious empires, like Rupert Murdoch's, the takeover of much of the internet by powerful interests, such as the Pentagon. We cannot investigate and debate these enough, and the Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom has done a remarkable job in tearing down facades in order to alert both media workers and the public. However, while we campaign for a truly democratic ownership of the press and broadcasting, we surely must be aware that the responsibility falls to us journalists not to be consumed by insidious institutional agendas and propaganda that today sees little distinction between "media" and "information control".

It is no longer good enough to say: "Nobody told me to say this or to leave out that." There is no conspiracy because a conspiracy is unnecessary. Journalists and broadcasters are no different from academics, bureaucrats and others in internalising the priorities and vocabulary of established power: of "us". But others are not charged with keeping the record straight day by day, as we journalists are. Yes, those who look behind the one-way moral mirror know they are likely to be tagged "committed" (to what? the truth?) or "biased" – when the bias is the other way. They ought not to be deterred; dissent is growing.

In the United States, senior journalists – from editorial writers on the New York Times to former TV stars – now concede, or confess, that had they investigated and challenged the lies that led to the invasion of Iraq, instead of amplifying and echoing them, tens of thousands of people would be alive today. That is a measure of the responsibility we journalists bear. The old clubby defensiveness will no longer do; the public, the majority of whom regard Tony Blair not as a bringer of democracy and human rights to Iraq but a liar, are way ahead of us. I suggest we catch up.

Forget the lies. Forget the law. Forget the truth. It's a BBC fact.

invasion was illegal – these were all cast aside as well-paid journalists rushed with open arms to embrace the greatest scandal of our lifetime. This is not to suggest they are chastened. Shortly before Christmas, the BBC's embedded man in Iraq, Paul Wood, stood in front of a British tank and stated that British and American forces "came to Iraq in the first place to bring democracy and human rights." No quoting Blair or Bush. Forget all that stuff about WMDs.

"WHEN THE truth is replaced by silence," said the Soviet dissident Yevgeni Yevtusyhenko, "the silence is a lie." There is a surreal media silence today, full of the "noise" of twenty-four news that is often not news at all, but a series of tales spun by those with power, justifying their deceptions and violence. Broadcasters gesture cryptically at the truth, but continue, as if by instinct, to present received wisdoms in clichéd language acceptable to "us", the term frequently used for Western power: its narcissism and censorship by omission, its good and bad terrorists, worthy and unworthy victims. This is journalism through a one-way moral mirror.

Through this one-way moral mirror, "objectivity" and "impartiality" have become code for a profound establishment bias. This is especially true of the BBC, whose news and current affairs on great issues, such as Iraq and the Middle East, have become largely unwatchable for those with prior knowledge or merely enquiring minds: the kind of minds journalists are meant to have.

Take the news of April 9, 2003, the day the Western media celebrated the entry of American tanks into Baghdad. This was the climax not of a war but of an unprovoked,

A voice for media freedom

By **Granville Williams**

THERE ARE a number of distinctive and continuing themes which emerge from a review of the 149 back-issues of *Free Press*, the public face of the CPBF

The first is that our work and activity have inspired others to emulate us. In February 1987 *FP39* reported the launch of FAIR: 'Inspired by the example of the CPBF a group of journalists in the US last year launched their own campaign with the aim of providing a progressive critique of bias in the American media.' And in *FP137* we reported the launch in November 2003 of the Free Press Media Reform conference in Madison, Wisconsin, an inspirational event which I was privileged to be at. Both this conference and the second, even larger, event held in St Louis (*FP146*) revealed a powerful movement for media reform in the USA and the co-founders, Bob McChesney and Bill Nichols, acknowledge the CPBF was their model for the project. In Canada, Rob Hackett, an occasional contributor to *FP*, and also someone who has documented our history, established a CPBF organisation. And in 2006 we are involved in a project to develop a network of organisations based on the CPBF model, initially within the European Union, and further afield eventually, as part of our

response to the threats of an increasingly globalised media.

Dramatic changes in the media have also been reflected in the journal's pages. At the AGM in April 1982 the organisation's name was changed to include broadcasting, and the original seven founding aims were modified and extended to ten (we have subsequently updated our aims again to include the important new communications technology, the internet, and to

We have sustained an important critical voice for media reform since 1979. That is no mean achievement.

address media manipulation and 'spin'). Two contributors to *FP*, Gary Herman and Nicolas Jones, have helped us to understand the importance and policy issues behind both these developments.

But what leaps out, as one goes through the back issues of the journal, is the energy and commitment of a range of individuals and organisations who have contributed ideas and energy to the coherent set of policy ideas which still inspire and shape the organisation's work. We have produced three *Media Manifestoes*, for example, to

intervene in policy debates in the run-up to general elections (1986, 1996 and 2005) and when the media beats the drum for war we have produced special issues of *FP* to analyse the media's performance during the 1982 Falklands War, the 1991 Gulf War, Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq 2003.

January 2006, the twentieth anniversary of the Wapping lock-out, is an appropriate time to recognise that the CPBF was a coalescence of media trades unionists, academics, political activists and individuals concerned about the impact of press concentration on the accurate and fair reporting of industrial relations. It was our argument that the ownership of national newspapers by a few powerful media groups and proprietors distorted the reporting of news, but particularly about trades unions and industrial relations. This led to nearly all the national unions affiliating to the CPBF. And we saw during the 1984-85 miners' strike powerful evidence to demonstrate how the state and the media were able to do their damage.

Of course over the years some issues have shifted to the margins. Financial pressures have forced the CPBF to give priorities to the core issues we can pursue but we have sustained an important critical voice for media reform since 1979. That is no mean achievement.

PRESSING THE RIGHT BUTTONS

Five years ago **Granville Williams** wrote a piece for *Free Press* that lifted the curtain on lobbying, the work of government and how the CPBF is perceived...

A few months ago we went to talk with the Media Minister, Chris Smith, and express our concerns about some of the policy ideas shaping the White Paper. It was all very polite, with a great emphasis on consultation and the need to hear the widest range of views. We also asked whether Chris Smith could speak at our conference on the White Paper on the 24 February.

Time dragged by and finally we were told that the minister had another engagement so we asked if someone else from the DCMS could put the government case. A fortnight before the conference we

sent a snotty letter saying we hadn't heard anything, and it really wasn't good enough. Finally a day or two before the conference we were told that Ruth Mackenzie, one of the DCMS special advisers would speak.

After the conference we scooped up all the paper left around on the platform and took them back to the office. A couple of sheets containing an intriguing series of emails between people in the DCMS Special Advisers Office were amongst them. We print them below. The contents speak for themselves, we think.

23 February 2001 13.51

Ruth has asked me to contact you about the CPBF conference on Saturday. Ruth thinks that this is something she has to do but if you think she doesn't need to and you can get her out of it then that's great. Otherwise would she be able to have a copy of the twenty-minute speech that you would be drafting for her as soon as possible

23 February 14.39

Since Ruth appears from the Post-It to have told them she'll do it and all officials declined (without knowing she'd agreed) I think she had better do it.

23 February 15.55

Attached a revision of the VLV speech the S of S gave which I hope now presses most of the necessary buttons for the CPBF. We'll bring down copies of the responses to the White Paper from the CPBF and the NUJ and the presentation Diana gave to the CBI, which may have some useful factual bits, though obviously the tone is about opposite that needed for the CPBF! As Ruth will see, the CPBF are quite a demanding lot, but she'll just have to take note of views expressed at the conference and say she'll report them back at the ranch.

I've tried to take note of their particular beef about the length of the consultation process.

Fake news in the UK



Fake news is not confined to the US or Iraq, says David Miller, who examines the British Foreign Office's own propaganda machine

Questioning the occupation is out of the question, but some criticism of US policy is possible. At the end of 2003 we were treated to an extraordinary apology for the British occupation of Iraq in 1920. The "suggested intro" reads: "This year is not the first time an outside power has sought to construct a modern, democratic, liberal state in Iraq. Britain tried to do the same in the 1920s, after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire".

Over 400 stations around the world receive BSN stories. 185 are regular users of the service, including broadcasters in Russia, Germany, Africa, Malaysia, Indonesia, Japan and Australia. The production of this fake news is funded entirely by the British Foreign Office

The benevolence of the US and the UK is simply assumed:

"Today's US-led coalition, like the imperial occupiers of eighty years ago, are trying to free Iraq's government and security services from corruption and abuse."

But the clumsy strategy of the US is potentially "alienating a large section of the population". So the question arises what "useful lessons could be drawn" from the British experience. In reality the 1920 British occupation led immediately to a popular revolt which was ruthlessly suppressed. A puppet monarchy was imposed, which was neither modern nor democratic but was, according to Mark Curtis, one of the least popular in Middle-Eastern history.

The BSN strategy seems to be to emphasise the UK's cultural diversity. Bulletins regularly highlight ethnic minority contributions to Britain and interview leading

moderate Muslims. But on some issues, such as Palestine, it is possible to hear muted criticism of Israel. One item featured "A leading Israeli academic who has questioned both the wisdom and the effectiveness of the controversial 'separation fence'".

A clue to the thinking behind this lies in a 2003 report for the Foreign Policy Centre which was co-authored by its then Director Mark Leonard.

Leonard advised the Foreign Office on its post 9/11 Public Diplomacy Review in 2002 and was later appointed to the resulting Public Diplomacy Strategy Board which directs Foreign Office propaganda strategy. Leonard has no qualms about the deceptive nature of fake news.

He wrote in 2002: "If a message will engender distrust simply because it is coming from a foreign government then the government should hide that fact as much as possible." The Foreign Policy Centre report suggests the British government should not be afraid of "bloodying

the Americans' noses" in its propaganda messages on Israel/Palestine. The aim is to "ensure that the differences between UK and American positions and thinking are emphasized". The point is to tackle the perception that Britain "apishly follows every American lead" so the "usefulness" of "UK support for the US" is increased. This strategy of providing left cover for America conforms to Blair's wider Iraq strategy. It is clear from documents leaked over the past year (including the Downing Street memo) that the plan was to use the United Nations as a device for gaining legitimacy for the invasion. In other words, fake news is a key element of a strategy predicated on cynical deception.

• **David Miller is co-founder of Spinwatch.org and Editor of Tell Me Lies: Propaganda and media distortion in the attack on Iraq (Pluto, 2004)**

ASUCCESSION OF 'fake news' scandals in America has revealed a widespread pattern of funding public relations agencies who use actors to produce 'news' which is then broadcast as if it was genuine. The same practice has been adopted in Iraq, where newspapers have been paid to insert copy. These stories have raised eyebrows in the United Kingdom about the pitiful quality of US democracy. But there is plenty of fakery in the British news too.

British Satellite News (BSN) is a key example. It describes itself as "a free television news and features service". Broadcasters can use BSN material "directly into daily news programmes and services". Their website doesn't say who funds or provides the service. But BSN is provided by World Television which makes internal videos and fake news releases for multinationals such as GlaxoSmithKline, BP and Nestlé. World Television also produced Towards Freedom Television on behalf of the British Government. This was a propaganda broadcast distributed in Iraq by US Army psychological operations teams.

According to World Television, by November 2003 BSN propaganda material was being "used regularly by 14 of the 17 Middle-East countries". Over 400 stations around the world receive BSN stories. 185 are regular users of the service, including broadcasters in Russia, Germany, Africa, Malaysia, Indonesia, Japan and Australia. The production of this fake news is funded entirely by the British Foreign Office.

The diet of 'news' received by viewers of the service includes an endless pageant of government ministers and other official spokespersons. Recent headlines on Iraq include:

Question time for Prime Minister
(11 January 2006)

Iraqi ambassador talks of allied troop timetable
(9 January 2006)

Prime Minister in surprise visit to Iraq
(22 December 2005)

The Psychology of terror — experts meet
(23 December 2005)

Iraqi ambassador upbeat on elections
(14 December 2005)

UK voting for Iraq gets underway
(13 December 2005)

UK police chiefs meet on terror issues
(12 December 2005)

UK Foreign Affairs Committee on terrorism
(9 December 2005)

Corporate greed rules

By Tim Gopsill

WHEN SEAN Dooley retired in December after 18 years as editor of the Sentinel, Stoke-on-Trent's evening paper, he made some trenchant criticisms of the way the owners, Northcliffe Newspapers, were running their business. Some of their decisions, he said, "can best be described as corporate bollocks designed more to produce a result on paper than to secure the future for the business, the staff or the shareholders."

"Everybody chases the Holy Grail of producing what we produce for the least possible cost ... The focus is all on saving cash and pushing up the profit margins a few points."

A couple of days earlier Northcliffe's own parent company, the Daily Mail group, had stunned the City by putting the 70-year-old subsidiary on the market. The group owns 112 papers, 16 of them dailies, and is valued at £1.5 billion.

It didn't surprise the staff, who had worked out that the massive round of cost-cutting and job losses now under way was intended to boost the price for a sale. They know what Dooley was talking about. "Aim Higher" was the "corporate bollocks" title the company gave the plan; "Aim, Fire!" was the journalists' version.

When the Northcliffe sale was announced the journalists on the Western Daily Press in Bristol put themselves up for auction on eBay. A fifth of the staff – 36 journalists – were facing the sack. "Be warned, though," they put in the ad. "We have standards. Anyone wanting a bunch of cynical hacks to recycle press releases and churn out advertorials had better look elsewhere."

Northcliffe is selling up because it can't extract sufficient profit from their papers. Last year's operating profits were £102 million, on turnover of £520 million – a 20 per cent return that elsewhere in industry would be regarded as phenomenal. In provincial newspapers, however, Northcliffe's rivals are making even more: Trinity Mirror, the market leader with 20 per cent of sales, Newsquest, with 18 per cent, a wholly owned subsidiary of the giant US publisher Gannett Corporation, and Johnston Press, the fourth biggest (15 per cent), all turn in more than 30 per cent profits. Northcliffe has 16 per cent of the market.

The groups compete by cutting costs, and it seems Northcliffe has decided that it cannot cut enough. Charles Sinclair, chief executive of the Daily Mail group, said:

WHO OWNS YOUR LOCAL DAILY?

Ownership of evening papers around Britain

TRINITY MIRROR
(20% of the market)

Birmingham, Liverpool, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, Cardiff, Middlesbrough, Huddersfield, Coventry

NEWSQUEST (18%)

Bradford, Darlington, Oxford, Southampton, Bournemouth, Weymouth, Southend, Brighton, York, Swindon, Blackburn, Worcester, Colchester

NORTHCLIFFE (16%)

Bristol, Bath, Aberdeen, Swansea, Gloucester, Cheltenham, Derby, Leicester, Hull, Nottingham, Stoke-on-Trent, Lincoln, Scunthorpe, Plymouth, Torquay, Exeter

JOHNSTON PRESS (15%)

Edinburgh, Leeds, Sheffield, Halifax, Peterborough, Blackpool, Preston, Scarborough, Portsmouth, Sunderland, Hartlepool, Leamington, South Shields

OTHER COMPANIES

Glasgow, Manchester, Reading and Guildford, Wolverhampton and Wellington, Norwich and Ipswich, Oldham, Carlisle and Barrow, Dundee, Cambridge and Burton-on-Trent

All regional morning papers are all owned by the same company as the evening titles in the same cities.

"We won't go so far (cutting cost) that good journalism will be compromised because good journalism is what delivers audiences for our advertisers."

No doubt some of the rival groups would like to have a try but even the present lax regulatory regime (enforced by the Office of Fair Trading in the case of newspapers) is likely to balk at the possibility of one of the other three getting their hands on the group. The betting in the City is it will go to

a venture capitalist that would finish off the surgery and sell it on at a profit. At that stage it could be broken up into regional parts, and that's when the other groups could swoop. Johnston has already expressed interest, but it has just spent £160 million buying the Scotsman, Evening News and Scotland on Sunday in Edinburgh.

The industry has seen a frenzy of takeovers. When the Northcliffe titles are sold there will not be a single big-city paper with the same owner it had 12 years ago. There is a handful of papers owned by smaller groups (see table).

The reason is that there is so much money to be made. Since they got rid of the print unions publishers have been able to use technology to slash the costs of production. Local papers now are milk cows, churning out cash for the shareholders and for investment by the groups in new technology ventures that will take time to show a profit.

The NUJ has not been in a position to offer much resistance. In the 1990s it was "deregulated" in virtually every office. Since 2000 it has clawed back a lot of ground and has succeeded, in an industry where pay levels are notoriously low, in getting the very lowest salaries, paid to trainees, significantly raised.

General Secretary Jeremy Dear says: "These huge, wealthy media companies have a myopic interest in profit but are blind to the fact that they have a duty in a democracy to provide the public with high quality news."

"Time and again they buy up newspapers, cut staffing to the bone, pay professional journalists poverty wages and squeeze the lifeblood out of respected local titles, then sell up and move on."

Part of the papers' profitability lies in their local and regional monopolies. Northcliffe, for instance, covers the whole West Country west of Bath and the whole of the north and east Midlands (see table) – a great swathe of England from Stoke to Hull. If the eventual sale is referred by the OFT to the Competition Authority the CPBF and others should argue that these monopolies are broken up, and conditions put on the deal that require the papers to be returned to some kind of local control, as existed before the big groups started scooping them up.

• Tom Gopsill is the editor of the *National Union of Journalist's magazine the Journalist*. He is currently writing a history of the union.

Sources victory for Ackroyd

By Barry White

ROBIN ACKROYD, a freelance journalist who wrote an article about the hospital treatment and force-feeding of Moors Murderer Ian Brady, has won the right to protect his source after a six-year legal battle with the Mersey Care NHS Trust.

The High Court ruling given on 7 February confirmed that someone trying to get a journalist to reveal their source must prove a "pressing social need" for the identity of that source to be disclosed.

After a rigorous analysis of all the circumstances surrounding the case the judge, Mr Justice Tugendhat confirmed there is "a vital public interest" in the protection of a journalist's sources and said:

"[The defendant] has a record of investigative journalism which has been authoritatively recognised, so that it would not be in the public interest that his sources should be discouraged from speaking to him where it is appropriate that they do so."

In a statement issued straight afterwards Ackroyd, who was backed by the NUJ, said: "The way a society treats its prisoners, patients – indeed each and every citizen, including journalists – is a test of its maturity."

"Ian Brady, as odious as his crimes were, was mishandled and mistreated. This was and still is a matter of public interest, not least because it has led to the longest running hunger strike in British penal history."

"I investigated the facts and the issues and today my efforts have been vindicated – as they were when, seven years ago, a judicial inquiry urged the government to 'grasp the nettle' and close Ashworth. The institution was described as 'dysfunctional'. Managers were secretive and out of touch. Reports were suppressed. Ministers, officials, the press – and thereby the public – were misled."

Ackroyd gave extracts from Brady's medical records to the Daily Mirror, which printed them in an article in December 1999.

The House of Lords ordered the Daily Mirror to disclose the source of the leaked medical records. When Ackroyd came forward, the Ashworth secure hospital launched legal proceedings in an attempt to force him to reveal his source.

Mersey Care NHS Trust has been given leave to appeal.

A right to reply

By Robert Henderson

A statutory right of reply (RoR) is a thing of journalistic nightmares. That tells you it is the best remedy for those who cannot afford to sue for libel. But the media is looking a gift horse in the mouth for a RoR would provide the strongest guard against any government desire to formally regulate newspapers and to further interfere with broadcasters, because an effective cheap means of rapid redress available to everyone, including politicians incidentally, capsizes the prime argument for state regulation. A RoR is the perfect non-political remedy for media abuse because it is a self-sustaining and self-regulating mechanism.

Costs could easily be kept low. First, by making libel the only reason for refusing a RoR and then only for that part of a proposed reply which was libellous. Second, by empowering Small Claims Courts to decide whether a claimed libel exists and, if the court does not agree that it does, to order the newspaper or broadcaster to publish the disputed reply. There should be no higher court appeal against the Small Claims Court's decision unless the appellant pays both sides' costs. This would allow justice while preventing those seeking a RoR from being intimidated out of their right by the threat of heavy costs.

How would it work?

The qualification for a RoR would be simple and objective: a media outlet has printed or broadcast material about an individual.

In the case of newspapers I would give a respondent 300 words as an automatic right and another 500 words for every 1000 words published about him or her over 1500 words. The respondent's reply should be printed on the same page as the story to which they are responding. If the newspaper responds to a reply then the person responded to would get another RoR.

Broadcasting is more problematic but a written reply by the person criticised could be read out on air. Where the person has the confidence to speak for themselves, they should be allowed to broadcast their reply.

Practical fears

The media will say that this is completely impractical, that their papers and broadcasts would be full of nothing but replies. In fact, the general experience of the introduction of new opportunities offered to the public is that there is an initial

burst of activity which soon settles down to a hard core of those willing to make the effort. If the introduction of a right to reply proved the sociological odd man out and the media was overwhelmed, the system could be reviewed.

A narrow RoR would be worthless. A RoR should not be limited to inaccuracy. There is often no easy way of proving the truth or otherwise of ostensible "facts". If a RoR was restricted to inaccuracy, the media would assuredly undermine it by arguing interminably.

Then there is opinion. This is often more damaging than inaccuracy. Moreover, there is no clear distinction between fact and opinion. Suppose I write of an actress that "she is a whore" that is a statement of fact which, in principle, can be tested objectively. But what if I write "she has the morals of a whore"? Is that fact or opinion?

The present non-legal remedies

These are both cumbersome and unfair. For example, the Press Complaints Commission (PCC) is comprised entirely of people drawn from the media or from those associated in some way with the media, and the organisation is funded by the press. Unsurprisingly, a non-celebrity complainant to the PCC rarely succeeds.

But this misses a larger point. No matter how formally honest any media regulating body was, it could no more serve the public generally than the legal profession can serve the general public in actions for libel where there is no legal aid.

The numbers of complaints actually considered formally by the PCC and the broadcasting authorities is minute, running into a few hundred a year – most complaints never get a full hearing or investigation. If the public began to use these bodies enthusiastically they would be overwhelmed.

The effect on the media

Faced with an immediate published response to any inaccuracy or abusive opinion and the possibility of having to submit themselves to public examination in a small claims court, journalists and broadcasters would cease to be cavalier about what they write.

The present relationship between the media and anyone they choose to criticise is analogous to someone who binds a man and then punches him. It is not a contest but an act of cowardice.

'Big Brother' – the perfect neoliberal TV programme

By Phil Hearse

IN THE recent debate about whether Respect MP George Galloway should have taken part in Channel 4's reality show *Celebrity Big Brother* perhaps the least discussed aspect was that he was lending credibility to the perfect neoliberal TV programme – *Big Brother* itself

No programme so completely captures, in just about every conceivable aspect, the economics, politics and cultural banality of our neoliberal age. As Mike Wayne points out in his book *Marxism and Media Studies* (Pluto Press), *Big Brother* in terms of the hours of viewing generated and advertising revenue brought in, is wonderfully cheap TV. Together with *Big Brother's Little Brother*, hour upon tedious hour is generated and it is all 'new'. No problem of repeats, because the house's inmates will do something 'different' (or at least say something different) each day.

Revenue is also generated by the high cost of phone calls to vote on which house-mates should be evicted. On one evening seven million people rang in to vote. Further revenue streams are created by books, magazines, caps and T-shirts.

Ideologically *Big Brother* involves a series of vile elements. First and foremost is a sadistic element – delight in ritual humiliation. The programme can only work if the inmates make idiots of themselves.

Also there is the idea that people will do anything for money. To get large amounts of money in capitalist society you will give away your dignity and grovel. (Of course is that is what numerous service workers do on a daily basis, but they do it because they have to, not out of ambition and greed.)

Then again *Big Brother* – in its 'normal' as well as 'celebrity' version – is part of the

cultural apparatus of late capitalism celebrating 'celebrity' itself. Celebrity today is a uniquely debased and mystifying version of the Hollywood-created 'star system', generated in the 1920s and '30s.

A vast exaggeration of the merits of the few very famous devalues the merits of the millions of 'ordinary' people who are by definition 'unimportant'. And of course it promotes the notion that the only solutions are individual work-based solutions which will make you better off, even if you can never aspire to fame or real celebrity. Collective solutions are not so much subversive as merely unthinkable.

Big Brother is political by banning politics (one of many miscalculations by George Galloway). The programme allows controversy only about the most trivial of things within the house itself.

And *Big Brother* celebrates one of the most threatening aspects of modern Britain – surveillance itself. Britain is the most monitored and watched society in the world, even if post-Patriot Act America is catching up.

Finally, *Big Brother* comes into its own in its symbiotic relationship with the popular press. Part of that is the witch hunt. Contestants, particularly women, are singled out by the popular press, as being hate figures because they are variously nasty, fat (a favourite), 'slags', gay, transsexual and of course – finally we have it – left-wing in the shape of George Galloway.

All this suggests that for all those making a radical critique of modern society, any association whatever with *Big Brother* and similar shows is to make a pact with the devil – one you can never win.

Phil Hearse is a lecturer in communication studies and the editor of www.marxsite.com

Demons, dragons and bogeymen

By Sue Mew

Culture Wars: The Media and the British Left

James Curran, Ivor Gaber & Julian Petley, Edinburgh University Press, £14.99

ATTEMPTS BY the media to demonise political dissent are nothing new. Neither is this confined to British shores or the emergence of the municipal Left during the 1980s and 1990s. This is an issue which has an ongoing relevance and currency for all who seek to challenge or question the prevailing political consensus – whether in this country or abroad – and not least the ideological role played by the mainstream media in the construction and demonisation of dissenting voices and politics as 'political dragons' and 'other'.

Culture Wars provides an excellent history and analysis of the emergence of the progressive urban left in British politics post-1979 and throughout nearly two decades of Conservative rule. A history which spans the breakdown of the post-war welfare settlement, the crisis-ridden record of the Wilson/Callaghan government (1974-1979) and the political decline and fragmentation of the Labour Party through to the rise to power of the municipal Left in the form of 'radical pluralist' councils such as the Greater London Council (GLC) and the construction and traducing of the 'loony Left'.

The book covers a lot of ground. It begins by contextualising the emergence during the 1980s of a new progressive politics that shaped the thinking of many municipal left councils, the changing composition of the London Labour Party and the rise to power within the GLC and the ILEA of political figures such as Ken

Livingstone and Frances Morrell – figures who were influenced by the values of the 1960s.

An important point made in *Culture Wars* is how the progressive politics that was a feature of many urban left councils during this period and which sought to connect to new social constituencies, including progressive sections of the middle class, became the subject of debate, political conflict and local government regulation by successive Conservative Governments under the premiership of Margaret Thatcher. The role that the largely right-wing British press played during this period in the vilification of 'loony left' councils and leading figures such as Ken Livingstone (Leader of the GLC) and Bernie Grant (Leader of Haringey Council) is well documented in three case studies which examine the scaremongering, 'loony narratives' and blatant misrepresentations of municipal left council politics and policies.

Where this book works well is in making the connections between culture, politics and the role of the media in representing, and influencing, social change. Whilst many books have been written about the 'loony left' phenomenon of the 1980s and the press stigmatisation of left-wing councils, not all have sought to, or successfully interwoven, the myriad cultural, political and historical strands that comprised this period within British politics.

Not many, if any, books have made the connections between the generational culture wars and values that acted as a vehicle for progressive politics within municipal councils during this period, their subsequent entry into mainstream politics, and the way in perceptions and representations of the 'loony left' were strategically used and maintained by a new breed of unelected political mandarins such as Philip Gould and Peter Mandelson in the 'product differentiation' and rise to power of 'New Labour' as distinct from its 'other'.

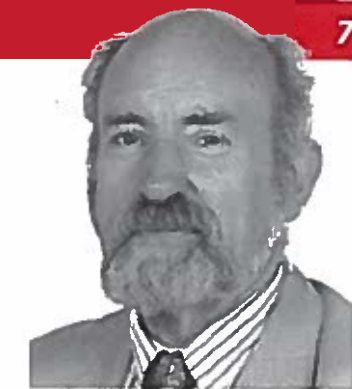
This book provides a well worth read for any one interested in the study of media and dissent. Some of the lessons and connections between past and present should not be hard to make.

tion, which welcomed him on his release from the Shikma prison in Ashkelon, I found that Chapter 12, which recalled those events on 21 April, brought back vivid memories.

It's a 'must read' for those who are concerned about justice for Mordechai and the history of Israel's attempts to cover up its nuclear programme.

A special discount offer of 25% is available to Free Press readers. For your copy send £15 (which includes P&P) to the CPBF national office. Please make cheques payable to the 'Campaign to Free Vanunu'.

Phillip Whitehead



By Hugh Kerr

Phillip Whitehead; born May 30, 1937, died December 31, 2005

PHILLIP WHITEHEAD was a rare politician who achieved much outside of politics. After national service he studied philosophy, politics and economics at Oxford and became president of the union in 1960. Phillip was a student at Oxford with John McGrath and Liz McLennan of 7:84 theatre fame and years later John came to Strasbourg to support Phillip's attempt to protect European culture and cinema against Hollywood domination.

After Oxford he went into television, first as a TV producer for the BBC on Panorama and later for ITV, where he edited *This Week*.

He stood for Derby North in the 1983 election and after losing, he went back into television as an independent producer and made many award-winning programmes, notably the *World at War* with Jeremy Issacs. He won an Emmy in 1974.

He was elected MEP for Staffordshire East and Derby in 1994 and after boundary changes, represented the East Midlands until his death. As a colleague, I came to know and admire Phillip.

My first conversation with him was on the on the Culture Committee of the European Parliament. He said: "I have come here to shaft Rupert Murdoch," and indeed he helped to draft European legislation which made it impossible for Murdoch to dominate European satellite TV as he did in the UK.

He was a past chairman of the Consumers' Association in Britain, so was a natural choice as chairman of the European Parliament's consumer intergroup in which he worked to strengthen European consumer protection.

Phillip had been a Labour MP for Derby North from 1970-83 and brought his skills and knowledge to Europe. He was a staunch pro-European and received a medal from Lech Walesa for his part in bringing Poland into the EU.

Although he admitted he was a social democrat, he was never a conventional New Labour politician. I well remember him greeting Donald Dewar, then Labour's chief whip and sent to Brussels to keep us unruly MEPs in line. Phillip said: "Ah, Donald, you are a good man sent over to do a bad job."

He had a great sense of humour and a fund of amusing stories which made him a good companion and, again a rare thing in politics, a genuinely nice person.

He leaves a wife, Christine, three children and four grandchildren.

Granville Williams adds: Phillip Whitehead, when he was MP for Derby North, was one of the original sponsors of the Campaign for Press Freedom founding document, *Towards Press Freedom*, published in September 1979. When he was elected an MEP in 1994 he maintained regular contact with the CPBF.

Back in the days when it still meant something to hold fringe meetings at Labour Party conferences because

real people came to them, as opposed to lobbyists or those on a corporate junket, Phillip often spoke on our platform. Finally the news of his sudden death came as the Broadcasting Experts Group (BREG), organised by the European Federation of Journalists, had invited him to speak at one of its meetings on the revision of the Television Without Frontiers directive. He was an independent minded politician, and in his previous career a highly-regarded broadcaster, who cared about the same issues as the CPBF.

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A must read for anyone concerned about Vanunu and Israel

Whistleblowers and the Bomb – Vanunu, Israel and Nuclear Secrecy (New Edition)

Yoel Cohen, Pluto Press £17.99

By Barry White

THIS IS a timely revision of the first edition. As we go to press, Mordechai Vanunu, released in April 2004 after serving 18 years in prison for revealing the existence of Israel's nuclear weapons, faces another court appearance. This time he is facing charges on at least 21 counts of alleged breaches of

the restrictions imposed upon him on his release. If found guilty, he could be sent back to prison. Additionally, the Israeli Supreme Court recently rejected his appeal against the limitations imposed upon him prohibiting him from leaving Israel or speaking to non-Israeli citizens.

The Supreme Court said Vanunu possessed additional, as yet unpublished, classified information and therefore still posed a danger to state security. Vanunu says he has no such information and has a right to speak out.

Yoel Cohen's book gives the background to the events leading up to the original trial, uses first hand material from it and includes an interview he had with Mordechai in July after his release. It also offers a critique of the *Sunday Times'* role in the original affair and examines the impact of Vanunu's release on Israeli society. It examines the significance of the original disclosures and the international campaign to secure his release. Having been involved with the British campaign for Mordechai I found this book difficult to put down. And having been part of the delega-

Purnell to address campaign's 'Keep Broadcasting Public' conference

By Kathleen Lowe

THE GOVERNMENT'S long-awaited White Paper on the future of the BBC will be presented to trade unionists and media campaigners by the minister responsible for broadcasting, James Purnell, on Saturday 1 April.

That is also the new date of a major conference 'Keep Broadcasting Public – BBC Charter Renewal' where Mr Purnell, Minister for Creative Industries and Tourism, will be the keynote speaker.

The event is being held at the London headquarters of the National Union of Journalists – a joint conference of the CPBF, TUC and the Federation of Entertainment Unions (FEU).

In the White Paper and accompanying agreements the government will lay down its proposals for the BBC's next Royal Charter – the ground rules for the BBC's operations over the next decade.

The conference has been moved to 1 April because the White Paper is not now due until March and because the new date offers the opportunity to debate with the Minister directly.

The broadcasting unions are already grappling with extensive job cuts and priva-



▶ Broadcasting minister James Purnell will address the CPBF conference

tisation being inflicted on their members at the BBC. They fear that an unfavourable Charter, influenced by pressure from the big commercial broadcasters and the government's desire to keep the BBC on a tight rein, could leave the Corporation with a much reduced role as a public service broadcaster.

Arrangements are in hand for the CPBF to put these concerns to Mr Purnell at a meeting on 7 February and the April conference will reinforce the Campaign's efforts.

The event will analyse central issues such as 'top slicing' of the licence fee, BBC governance, the role of Ofcom, and keeping production in-house.

It will also organise a concerted campaigning push on the Charter when it comes before Parliament in the late spring.

Full details of speakers and the conference agenda will appear in the next issue of Free Press. Meanwhile readers can use the enclosed flyer to register and keep up to date with developments by visiting the cpbf website: www.cpbf.org.uk

Unions fear an unfavourable Charter, influenced by pressure from commercial broadcasters

Free Press is edited by Julie-ann Davies for the National Council

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