

FREE Press

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Looking for change in China

Bill Thompson
considers the impact
of new publishing
tools on freedom of
expression in China

When the first Emperor of China, Qin Shi Huang, ordered the construction of the Great Wall in 200 BCE he was trying to protect the newly-unified Chinese people from invasion by northern tribes.

Its modern equivalent, the Great Firewall of China, is more concerned with keeping the Chinese in, or at least under control. As well as restricting Chinese net users' access to content which may challenge the worldview of the ruling Communist party it also limits their ability to create their own content on websites or blogs, engage freely in discussion in chat rooms or send and receive emails.

Given the growing importance of online tools for communication, and the massive growth of "citizen media" around the world, the way the net is being managed, controlled and censored in China — and other closed societies — should worry anyone committed to freedom of expression and an open press.

After all, if the future of the media lies online, and television, radio, newspapers and magazines are going to change beyond recognition because of the internet, being able to exert effective control over online activity is a powerful tool for a repressive regime.

The Chinese government has invested heavily in managing the Internet, hoping to benefit from increased use of the network while minimising the impact it might have on the social and political situation.

There are three main elements, all working together. At the core lies the latest network management technology from Western companies like Cisco and Sun, used to monitor, filter and limit traffic. In addition an estimated 30,000 human monitors are constantly reading Websites, blogs and chat rooms to look

for material that may have got around the technical measures.

Finally, there is a legal framework which penalises "inappropriate" use of the network, forces companies to limit their customers' freedom and requires registration of personal blogs.

Chinese internet companies have a list of banned terms that they have to look out for, and foreign companies can only host their content or services on computers based in China if, like Google, Microsoft and Yahoo! before them, they sign the government's "Public Pledge on Self-Discipline for the Chinese Internet Industry".

This obliges them not to host or transmit information that "breaks laws or spreads superstition or obscenity" or that "may jeopardize state security and disrupt social stability". This is what lies behind the censorship of google.cn, Google's Chinese-hosted index, and the decision by MSN Spaces to remove the popular blog written by Michael Anti (the pen name of Zhao Jing) one of the most interesting Chinese bloggers.

There are ways around most of the technical restrictions put in place by the authorities. Just as clever programmers have figured ways to bypass the copy-protection on CDs and DVDs, groups of more politicised hackers have developed tools that will bypass the Chinese firewall.

For example Anonymizer now offers a web-based service for Chinese users that, according to the site, will let users look at websites "while free from oppression and fear of persecution or retribution", providing what they call "a censor-free Internet experience for those in oppressed nations". However there is a real danger that these programs may encourage people to break the law and expose them to legal action by creating a false sense of security.

Even without the use of anti-censorship tools some writers manage to publish material which upsets the authorities. While detailed information about prosecutions is difficult to come by, Reporters without Borders believe that 49 "cyber-dissidents" and 32 journalists are currently in prison on charges related to internet postings.

In March Cai Lujun was released after three years in prison for posting a series of articles online criticising the Chinese government. Another writer, Li

Jianping, was arrested in May 2005 and has now gone on trial charged with "inciting the subversion of state sovereignty" in articles and comments for foreign websites.

One of the more controversial cases in the West was that of Li Zhi, who was jailed for eight years in December 2003 for "inciting subversion" over online comments criticising corruption. The case against him relied on information provided by Yahoo!'s Hong Kong subsidiary. A year earlier Yahoo! had provided information which led to the imprisonment of reporter Shi Tao for "divulging state secrets" by passing on information about the risks of referring to the anniversary of the Tiananmen Square protests to foreign websites.

Despite these high profile cases, it may be a mistake to see blogging as a major source of concern to the Chinese authorities. The cyber-activist and co-founder of Global Voices Rebecca MacKinnon writes regularly about China on her personal blog, and after a visit there last November she noted that "the Chinese blogging scene is very divided and factionalized".

MacKinnon believes that "if one combines the growing online space for private civic discourse provided by blogs with a functionally effective system of censorship and filtering, the result appears to be a recipe for very gradual, slow evolution — not democratic revolution. Outside observers of the Internet and politics in China would do well to focus on the impact of blogs beyond the narrow scope of overt political protest and obvious political change".

Yet even slow change is to be welcomed in China as in any other closed society, and if this comes because individuals are able to share stories of daily life and mutual interests rather than overtly criticise the regime, that may be a start.

**Full report on the
Keep Broadcasting
Public Conference
inside this issue**

The Danish cartoon controversy

The furore sparked by the *Jyllands-Posten* cartoons has abated but debate on the issues is still ablaze and opinions continue to remain strongly divided

Granville Williams defends freedom of expression and freedom of the press

The intensity of the debate and protests, following the publication of the cartoons published in the Danish paper *Jyllands-Posten* on September 30 2005, has now subsided, but the issues raised remain. Within the CPBF, and beyond, there was criticism of the basic position contained in the statement we issued on February 3, 2006 (you can find it on the CPBF website).

I want to focus specifically on those criticisms by people and organisations on the left who reject arguments, based on key democratic ideas of 'freedom of expression' and 'freedom of the press', defending the publication of the cartoons. In the UK the Stop The War Coalition said: "We believe the central issue in the present controversy is not press freedom but racism... 'Press freedom' is not the question. Those who wish to fight for media freedom should concentrate on the role of the press in retailing the government's lies in the build-up to the Iraq war, on the government's legislative plans to restrict free speech under the pretext of the 'war on terror' and on the control of most of the mass media by a tiny number of big businesses."

Deepa Kumar on the *Monthly Review* website *MRZine* wrote two pieces which represent this position very clearly: 'Danish Cartoons: Racism Has No Place On The Left' (21/02/06) and 'Fighting Islamophobia: A Response to Critics' (03/04/06).

In her first article she insisted there was only one response: "...there is no neutral point in a world characterised by racism, wars, and imperialism — you are either on the side of the oppressed or oppressor... a 'free speech' defence of the racist cartoons, condemning the protests against them,

is liberal cover for right-wing arguments". In her second piece, a reply to critics, she argues that "giving even an inch to Islamophobia divides us and weakens our ability to build an effective opposition to the war in Iraq and the potential war on Iran".

I disagree with such responses to the controversy because they downgrade or dismiss important principles which the left (which I count myself as part of) should defend. In my view the defence of freedom of expression and freedom of the press in no way diminishes our ability to challenge racism, speak out strongly against the Blair/Bush war on terror and challenge the demonisation of Arabs and Muslims. It actually strengthens it.

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We do ourselves a disservice if our response to controversies, which are a combustible mix of religion, politics and censorship, is to ignore the facts. For example, lumping the 12 cartoons together and making parallels with those of the German Nazi newspaper, *Der Sturmer* and suggesting the *Jyllands-Posten* cartoons were in the same style as the Nazi anti-Semitic cartoons and caricatures is simply inaccurate. (Deepa Kumar does not do this, but Lee Sustar does in another US publication, *International Socialist Review*, March/April 2006). The quality of the cartoons, and the themes they expressed, varied widely. One cartoon, the bomb in the turban, became the particular focus for anger.

Cartoons are often about eliciting strong responses from newspaper readers. The cartoons were published in a conservative newspaper, as part of specific Danish debate concerning self-censorship, following the difficulty Danish writer Kåre Bluitgen claimed to have experienced in finding artists to illustrate a children's book about Muhammad. Flemming Rose, the cultural editor of *Jyllands-Posten*, contacted 40 cartoonists and asked them to draw the prophet as they saw him. The



The cartoons led to worldwide protests

12 cartoons he received were published with an article on self-censorship and freedom of expression. The cartoons, through the globalising power of the internet, have become available worldwide, whereas the article, written in a language understood by five million people, has had partial exposure. The controversy has resulted in deaths, violence and the arrest of seven journalists and editors in Jordan, Algeria and Yemen for printing the cartoons.

The CPBF statement said "charges of offence and blasphemy should not be deployed to curtail freedom of expression...restrictions on freedom of expression which privilege certain ideas and beliefs cannot be justified".

The history of the struggle in the UK for the freedom of the press in the 19th century, as Joss Marsh's *Word Crimes* demonstrates, was also about the struggle against blasphemy laws. Socialists in the 21st century should be arguing for the abolition of all blasphemy laws and not, as some do, supporting New Labour's Incitement to Racial and Religious Hatred Bill because the UK British National Party leader, Nick Griffin, would be in gaol if the law had been in force at the time of his recent trial.

The controversy has certainly made me more aware that there is not one single global definition of freedom of expression. Different viewpoints and cultures need to be respected, but the basic core issues still remain: freedom of expression, the right to publish and the right to offend have to be defined.

Links

Monthly Review website

<http://mrzine.monthlyreview.org>

The need for context

By Des Freedman

The most important thing to bear in mind concerning the *Jyllands-Posten* cartoons is context. Both the original publication of the cartoons and the campaign in conservative newspapers to re-print them took place in the context of increasing attacks on Muslims and on 'Islamic culture' that have followed 9/11 and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Arguments and statements that marginalise this context in favour of an absolute right to free speech risk playing into the hands of those who are interested neither in press freedom nor social justice.

Jyllands-Posten is not an innocent party in this controversy but an active participant in fomenting a political culture in Denmark that is systematically anti-immigrant and has led to the electoral success of the Danish People's Party (for whom a halt to immigration is a key demand).

People who are genuinely interested in freedom of speech would do better to confront those governments who have stepped up their attacks on press freedom as part of anti-terror laws rather than focusing on an incident that was deliberately designed to provoke Muslims in the current political climate. These were not playful cartoons

Improving cultural communication

The following is an excerpt from a submission made to the CPBF's online discussion forum

By Ibrahim Nawar

The anger in the Muslim world may be seen as nonsense by some people or groups in the West. They are mistaken. This Muslim anger has its own ground and will not be stopped by more confrontation. On the other hand, angry Muslims should know exactly what they are heading for. Is it for a holy war? Is it for revenge? Or is it for justice that may be achieved by sincere apology and a genuine understanding of Islam in the West? Islam is a religion of tolerance not revenge and Muslims are a people

but racist images that play on images of Muslims as terrorists that are already far too prevalent in the media.

We should further ask whether there is an absolute and irrevocable right to freedom of speech? Was it really a boost to free speech that the leader of the British National Party Nick Griffin was (thus far) acquitted on charges of inciting racial hatred? Are we really saying that there is an equivalent situation concerning, for example, the civil rights situation of Christians and Muslims in this country?

It seems to me the issue being raised is precisely not about freedom of expression but about the extension of Islamophobia across Europe

The argument about a principled support for freedom of speech in any circumstances ignores the question of power. Muslims and non-Muslims are not afforded the same power in many European states just as many of the voices championing free speech in the press are vastly better resourced and connected than some of the poorest and most detached people in these countries. As Onora O'Neill wrote in *The Guardian* on February 13: "Conferring the same freedom of expression on more powerful organisations, including media organisations, is now less easily justified. Once we take account of the power of the media, we are not likely to think that they should enjoy uncondi-

of peace not of suicide bombs. Muslim councils, intellectuals, media organisations in Europe should play a role in presenting the true Islam to the people in the West. Western media, schools and universities also have an important role in educating people about Islam. There is a lot to be done in opening the gate of dialogue between the Muslim and the Western civilizations on the basis of respect of their differences and the promotion of the supreme human values of freedom fraternity and justice.

In the Arab world the crisis of the Danish cartoons has taken its toll. At least three newspapers have been punished for publishing the cartoons. Two newspaper editors in Jordan have been sacked and a head of TV news in Algeria has been suspended. Journalists should not be punished if their intentions were to inform citizens about these cartoons. If there was any wrongdoing, then it should be dealt with through courts not by administrative orders.

The most practical question now is "what should be done next?" Muslims have the right to be angry about the

tional freedom of expression. We do not think corporations should have unrestricted rights to invent their balance sheets, or governments to... deceive their electorates. Yet contemporary liberal readings of the right to free speech often assume that we can safely accord the same freedom of expression to the powerless and the powerful".

It seems to me the issue being raised is precisely not about freedom of expression but about the extension of Islamophobia across Europe in the context of a sustained political attack on Muslim communities. To simply talk about rights to free speech WITHOUT acknowledging the context is dangerously abstract.

The decision in British newspapers not to publish the cartoons does not show restraint and 'common sense' but nervousness in the face of likely opposition. I am aware there is a tradition of racist Islamophobic cartoons and articles in the British press but do we really want new cartoons to be published in order for the press to be seen as consistent? There is a distinction between the right to publish (which should not be subject to government diktat) and the tactical decision to publish.

At a time when we in the CPBF should be trying to broaden our links with others in the movement and publicise our own Government's clampdown on free speech, we should make it clear that we condemn those who have taken the decision to publish the cartoons in the name of 'free speech' and declare our opposition to those who attempt to stir up racial hatred on minority groups who are already facing vilification and discrimination.

Danish cartoons. Their anger turned to deep frustration when many Western newspapers republished the images. As this anger may deepen and become more profound all actions that provoke Muslims should be stopped. *Jyllands Posten* should use one of its pages for a dialogue with the Muslim community in Denmark and Muslims all over the world. If the Muslim Council of Denmark wishes to take the paper to court, it should do so. Angry Muslims should make their demands clear and pursue the right way to achieve their aims. They may demand more than an apology. This anger, though legitimate, should not continue forever.

The crisis of the Danish cartoons has proved the need for a real understanding and dialogue between different cultures living side by side in European countries. Since 9/11 there has been a lot of talk about achieving better understanding between people from different cultures. Little has been done in that respect. There are extremists on both sides, don't give them a chance to dictate our future.

Keeping broadcasting public

On Saturday 1 April the CPBF, TUC and Federation of Entertainment Unions held a conference in London to discuss the future of the BBC after publication of the Government White Paper. Mick Gosling, Chair of the NUJ Press and PR branch reports on the events and highlights of the day

‘We want the licence fee to act as venture capital for creative talent and nowhere is this clearer than in the BBC’s investment in training and research and development.” Well it was April Fools Day, but the confusing comment of James Purnell MP, minister for creative industries and tourism did not amuse union delegates and academic specialists at a conference on the new BBC Charter organised by the TUC, Federation of Entertainment Unions and the CPPF.

Indeed, the creeping commercialisation and privatisation of the BBC ran through the recurrent themes of the day: the Window for Creative Competition (WOCC), the growing role of Ofcom, the democratic accountability of the proposed new BBC Trust, and



The conference was addressed by Broadcasting Minister James Purnell

who will fund the switchover from analogue to digital and the threats and possible opportunities that the Charter renewal process may still offer.

At present the BBC has to give out 25 per cent of its production to independent companies. WOCC puts a further 25 per cent up for grabs, guaranteeing only 50 per cent in-house production by the BBC. Professor Georgina Born, author of *Uncertain Vision*, a study of the BBC, said the establishment by BBC Director General Mark Thompson and Chairman Michael Grade of the WOCC will “go down as a sign of appeasement” and “a sacrificial lamb to government.”

“The key to the White Paper appears in Tessa Jowell’s foreword where she asks: ‘how can the BBC be a strong broadcaster with universal reach while not stifling innovation elsewhere, or using its unique advantages to compete with others?’”
Professor Tom O’Malley

Like Professor Born, Professor Tom O’Malley of the CPBF saw the creation of WOCC as a restraint and not a spur to future creative innovation from the corporation. The White Paper offered “no data, on what the impact of this will be on the BBC’s long term skills base, and on what the impact of this weakening of the skills base will have on creativity and innovation,” he said. That base can only be built on continuity. Likening the WOCC to the operation of the Private Finance Initiative in other areas of public service, it was a means of diverting public resources into private hands.

Caroline Thomson, BBC Strategy Director and Executive Board Member confirmed that natural history programmes were all produced in-house and this would make it more likely that the independents would pick up the entertainment side of the schedule.

As Bernie Corbett, general secretary of the Writers Guild, pointed out, if you added these programmes to long running shows like *Eastenders*, *Holby City*, *Doctors*, *Casualty* and *Judge John Deed*, “it will mean that anything more innovative like a one-off play or two-parters will have to be produced by the independents, there will be nothing left in the BBC for in-house production.”

Corbett was not optimistic that the independents would rise to such a challenge suggesting that their track record tends toward the game show and cheap comedy end of the market.

President of BECTU Tony Lennon said that Caroline Thomson had defined the White Paper as a victory for the BBC but the run up to its publication had seen the corporation undergoing its greatest upheaval in history. “The BBC has been left in a demoralised state with the cutbacks. They’ve done this to win the White Paper and 10 years of existence,” said Lennon.

He warned that producers are saying that if they need to “buy in 50 per cent of content they will not be able to take a creative and innovative role.” As a sign of the growing tendency to privatisation, Lennon quoted how the BBC had handed over technical training to a company that does not know how to train, namely Capita. Meanwhile, the company that owned BBC studios from the Manchester Ship Canal to the English Channel had been sold off. Lennon asked: “What does that say about the BBC’s commitment to training?”

And what of the growing role of Ofcom? Professor O’Malley saw the White Paper becoming a potential straitjacket via which Ofcom would

ensure that the BBC was penalised to the benefit of its commercial competitors. Yet the point is that most of the important proposals in the White Paper are based on an assumption that the BBC *will*, not *does* — “unfairly” compete with others.

He cited the role of Ofcom in the market testing of new services, though whether they were rolled out or not would in the final analysis remain the decision of the proposed BBC Trust. He noted that Ofcom was insisting on a review of public financing after five years of the new charter.

It’s easy enough to criticise the existing system of governance at the BBC. James Parnell did so, describing the present role of the Board of Governors as acting as defendant, jury and court of appeal.

However, Professor Born also saw problems with the concept of the Trust. She pointed out that the problem with the Governors in the past was their lack of knowledge of how the internal structure of the BBC operated. This ignorance had, particularly under John Birt, led to tendencies like casualisation and commercialisation taking place without many governors’ knowledge. She said: “What is needed is an accountable management to creative staff.”

Focusing on the concept of knowledge as power Professor Born suggested the Trust needed a research function into the work of the BBC and said: “Who will trust members be? Why is there no new independent cross party appointments panel?”

TUC general secretary Brendan Barber went further, stressing the new system of governance should provide for “the voices of working people to be heard.” Purnell said: “We agree with the trade unions that Trust membership should be made up of the varied and the good, not just the great and good.”

Just how varied remains an open question. “For all the rhetoric on accountability, it is about accountability to commercial competitors not licence fee payers,” said Professor O’Malley, who called for the removal of Ofcom from BBC affairs and the reinstatement of the wider public interest into the White Paper. That would require a very different Trust indeed!

Then came the vexed question of the switchover from analogue to digital. The minister emphasised the benefit to the BBC and those licence payers who presently only have analogue access. “At present people without access to digital are having to pay for it,” said Parnell. The minister declared that the process to decide the licence fee will be “the most open and robust ever.”

What many participants wanted to know was, who would pay? There were clear concerns expressed as to how much of the cost of the switchover will be funded from the licence fee.



From left to right - Tony Lennon, Jeremy Dear and Professors O’Malley and Born

Thomson confirmed the BBC is looking for “enough funds to deliver in the next 10 years what the White Paper provides the basis to achieve.” She confirmed that the switchover could not be done on the licence fee based on inflation rate level rises.

The minister had remained tight-lipped throughout regarding possible licence fee increases and, bearing in mind his reference to the licence fee as venture capital for the creative development of the UK, delegates had every reason to be concerned.

Professor Born was heavily critical of the role of Ofcom — which she claimed was “staffed by ex-Downing Street insiders” and “epitomised New Labour thinking” and its demand for a review public financing in five years time. She called for commercial broadcasters to be required to contribute to the cost of the switchover to digital broadcasting.

Journalist Victoria Brittain expressed her hope that if there were a grassroots revolt in favour of ring fencing public service broadcasting that there might be a backlash against the general tendency toward dumbing down in the media.

Granville Williams of the Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom believes there is still a real future for public interest broadcasting. He said: “I don’t see it disappearing in an apocalyptic way. It will be more a case of pressure from government and the commercial broadcasters. We need to raise voices and use energy in an energetic way to ensure an independent BBC.”

Labour MP John McDonnell, chair of the all-party NUJ parliamentary group also holds there is still a real chance to influence the future direction of the BBC and public service broadcasting. He said: “We are in a period of transition for six to 12 months maximum — the terrain is not all mapped out. We could get a foot in the door of the policy networks that surround ministers.”

McDonnell said the legacy agenda and an unsureness as to where individual ministers would stand under a new

leader meant there was an opportunity to make an impact.

“Maybe it is time to look to a limited campaign, bringing together specific groups over say 12 months with a specific agenda to influence ministers on. Through dialogue with ministers it could be possible to push back the private sector pressure,” said McDonnell, who felt the window of opportunity was wider regarding the media because it was less of a priority for the government that say “health, education or invading other people’s countries.”

Other areas where such a campaign could gain support included the Welsh and Scottish Assemblies, London Mayor and local government.

NUJ General Secretary Jeremy Dear welcomed McDonnell’s proposal and drew parallels between the way the BBC was now being privatised by stealth and what has been happening with the health and education services. He said: “The argument that the market offers greater choice to people does not add up when you study the evidence.”

Dear said the activity of the opponents of public service broadcasting over recent months proves there is still all to play for. “We need an alliance of consumers, citizens and those who work in the industry. The argument that public service has to be put before private profit is the long term battle that has to be won.”

We are watching the slow absorption of the BBC into the commercial sector, and the transformation of UK broadcasting towards a market centred system, with bits of public service broadcasting tagged around the edges. We need to campaign, initially, to reverse this trend, by arguing for change in the White Paper proposals. Only then will we be able to move forward to extend, democratise and build a diverse public service sector in the digital age.

With many thanks to Paul Donovan. Photographs appear courtesy of David Rotchelle

Stealth advertising

Jonathan Hardy examines Ofcom's plans for the future of product placement

European regulators are poised to permit product placement in the new audiovisual Directive (FP 148, 150). Here, Ofcom has completed a consultation on its proposals to change the rules which keep programmes free from paid-commercial messages. Currently only unpaid "prop" supply is permitted and commercial references are subject to rules against "undue prominence". Ofcom favours permitting product placement (PP) within certain genres. While it recognises that such placement will breach the legally enshrined principle of separation between programmes and advertising, it argues that benefits (new revenue stream) outweigh risks.

Ofcom's "pre-consultation discussions with stakeholders" did not involve any consumer or public interest groups. One such group, the National Consumer Council has come out strongly against product placement, describing it as a "stealth advertising tactic too far", and arguing there is a "fundamental and irreconcilable gap

between advertisers' ultimate expectations of product placement...and viewers' concerns". Of the 58 responses to the consultation, allies such as Voice of the Listener and Viewer and Public Voice have joined us in opposing the introduction of product placement, as do most individuals who responded. Even Ofcom's commissioned research, which was small-scale and flawed, reveals that 90 per cent of those questioned were either wary or strongly disapproved of allowing more prominent and more frequent placements.

The outcome of Ofcom's "consultation" with industry is a collusive formula for "evolutionary" change which most commercial broadcasters and advertisers endorse as the best way of removing the regulatory roadblocks and deregulating "in a cautious and progressive manner in order to help the sector and the audience to adjust to the change".

Once abandoned, regulation would be difficult to reimpose, and it is inconceivable that Ofcom, which interprets its deregulatory mission without much regard for its countervailing requirement to serve citizens, would do so. We argue that Ofcom's proposals would breach various requirements of the Communications Act, including pre-

venting "misleading" advertising. Permitting PP would fatally undermine broadcast advertising rules. All the efforts in the advertising code to prevent brand associations which may be damaging in various ways (cars and speed, alcohol or cigarette and sexual allure, "junk" food promotion to children) are much less enforceable in programme content.

In fact, promoters would have incentives to evade advertising restrictions, broadcasters and producers would have incentives to attract PP, and advertising rules would be inconsistently applied and so undermined. Recent research by the US Institute of Medicine, for instance, found that companies promoting unhealthy food and drink were increasingly targeting children through product placement, as well as other means.

Ofcom and the EU are rushing to allow commercial integration just as calls grow in America for effective regulation to ensure transparency and protect editorial integrity.

Here, the proponents of product placement are preparing the ground. We have a potentially powerful coalition stretching across civil society groups and commanding public support. But this will need to be vocal, and strategic, over the coming months. Our response to the consultation is available at www.cpbf.org.uk. Please get in touch via the office if you want more information or if you can help us.

No sale for Northcliffe

By Tim Gopsill

The Daily Mail group surprised the City in February when it suddenly called a halt to the sale of its highly profitable Northcliffe Newspapers chain of provincial papers. The company said the highest offer it had, of £1.3 billion, was too low.

It didn't surprise the hard-pressed staff, however, who had suspected it was a smart move to further tighten the screws on costs and staffing. Indeed, two weeks later it announced it was doubling the cost-cutting target of its "Aim Higher" project.

Originally the cutbacks, known as "Aim, Fire!" to the group's journalists, was projected to save £20 million a year by the end of 2006. Now that target is £45 million; already £22 million has been cut.

Northcliffe said it planned to "significantly increase" its regional online operation and boost the revenues generated by internet customers but capital expenditure is to be cut by 20 per cent over the next two years.

Martin Bright of the *New Statesman* was home affairs editor at *The Observer* when he broke Katharine Gun's story. Gun, who was working at GCHQ when, in 2003, she revealed the US was trying to "blackmail or bully six swing nations to vote for a second UN resolution to legitimise the attack on Iraq"

Gun was later arrested and charged under the Official Secrets Act for her disclosures. Her case was subsequently dropped. Calling for greater legal protection for whistleblowers she said: "Whistleblowers are our guarantee against dictatorship. We should be celebrated, not prosecuted."

Bright defended the publication of leaks. He said: "Publication is always justified. We should not ask why. Publication is always in the public interest. My regret with Katharine Gun is that we didn't go more quickly with the story...Had the American press reacted more quickly it could have made a difference to what happened in Iraq."

Bright said Gun was right to defend herself on grounds of necessity. He said: "The test should be real and immediate harm to public life...Katharine acted to save human life."

Cover-ups, lies and censorship

In February, the CPBF held a London conference on secrecy and censorship. The speakers included journalist Martin Bright, GCHQ whistleblower Katharine Gun and Mark Stephens, a solicitor representing Al-Jazeera.

Stephens says that now Downing Street has acknowledged there is a transcript of the conversation between President Bush and Tony Blair — during which it is alleged the bombing of Al-Jazeera's headquarters in Qatar was discussed — the Government will have to publish it.

Stephens has tried to access to the document via the Freedom of Information Act, but has had little success. He told the conference that he had received a call from someone in the Cabinet Office who told him: "It is clear the Government will have to hand this over... but hope to drag this out until the end of the Bush Presidency in the hope people think this is boring and not relevant... so the government will continue to filibuster."

Current affairs and Ofcom

By Patricia Holland

The current affairs genre has rarely felt itself to be secure on UK television — and the digital future promises even greater uncertainty.

Even so, Ofcom, the Communications regulator, is sanguine about the state of current affairs. Their research, revealed at a March seminar, shows a rise in programmes which "increase our understanding of the world through news, information and analysis of current events and ideas", and also an increase in the total hours such programmes are viewed. There is a similar picture for non-networked programmes in the nations and regions. But despite the bland reassurances there was a considerable sense of unease amongst the television executives and commissioners gathered in Ofcom's riverside palace.

As Roger Bolton, chairing the event, put it, there has always been a tension between what the audience wants and what it needs — in other words between programmes which will maximise audiences, and those that ought to be available in a democracy which depends on the circulation of reliable information. (And he should know. As an ex-editor of *Tonight*, *Panorama* and *This Week*, he has done his fair share of circulating information that audiences didn't know they wanted until they got it — much of which caused considerable upset to those in positions of power).

Current affairs has regularly been under attack in the television schedules. Channel controllers don't like it, they say, because it loses ratings. When a broadcaster is under pressure, current affairs is the first to go. But, as another ex-editor of *Panorama*, Steve Hewlett, pointed out, when Director General John Birt insulated it from the rest of the BBC output, it became dull and lost viewers. Current affairs needs the challenge of competing for audience attention. Historically, on the commercial channels, it has flourished when its producing companies were confident and prospering, and when, at the same time, it was protected by the regulator of the day.

And there is the crunch. To what extent is Ofcom either willing or able to protect the genre? Since it was set up by the 2003 Communications Act, with overseeing UK television as only part of

it broader remit, Ofcom has needed to balance what it sees as its main purpose — to de-regulate, with the requirement to support and strengthen public service broadcasting — in other words to regulate. Against its instincts, its job is to make sure that public values are not overridden by commercial ones. Despite its stated aversion to "box ticking", this has boiled down to a requirement for certain iconic genres to be present on those channels it describes as "Public service broadcasters" (or, rather dismissively, as "PSBs") — current affairs being one of them. Which is why, for their first six monthly review of "public service" programmes, Ofcom has been reviewing current affairs.

But their smugness will probably be short-lived. For one thing, only the terrestrial broadcasters were given public service obligations. Satellite and pay-per-view are exempt — and these are the channels which are gleefully marching towards the uncertain future. Nick Pollard, Head of *Sky News*, quoted his boss James Murdoch: "We're in the content and delivery business — we're not a television channel. We put any content on any medium — from computer screens to 3G phones." It was a foretaste of what could happen across the channels come analogue switch off.

For George Entwistle, the BBC's new Head of Current Affairs, the big change will come not with digital switch over itself, but as its effects develop "and linear content gives way to on-demand". The BBC, he predicts, will no longer run a bunch of channels, but will put additional programmes up on servers, which can then be downloaded by viewers, as and when (and if) they fancy.

But the most extreme prediction came from Kevin Carey, of the Ofcom Content Board, for whom television itself, in its traditional form, is on the way out. When convergence is total and channels no longer exist, he declared, regulation will become impossible. Already, ITV is slipping beyond the regulator's reach as its terrestrial licences lose their value, and it is forced to compete for advertising revenue as well as for audiences with an ever-expanding number of commercial channels free from any public obligation.

In such a scenario, what happens to the range, the scope and the importance of well informed and powerful journalism? "The public" — at least those consulted in Ofcom's focus groups — were clear that they both needed and appreciated factual content — although they made little distinction

between news and current affairs. So can "long form" journalism — programmes which set out to fill in the background, analyse, challenge and investigate — in other words, traditional current affairs — possibly survive? And will Ofcom find the will — and the method — to protect them in the future? The question was left hanging in the air.

The Angry Buzz: This Week and Current Affairs Television by Patricia Holland Published by I.B.Taurus £14.99

By Granville Williams

Pat Holland takes the title of her new study from an evocative comment by Professor Sylvia Harvey: "We need the angry buzz of current affairs". The problem is that apart from the *Dispatches* strand on Channel 4 there is precious little of it around. Even the BBC's flagship *Panorama* is battered, losing direction and impact.

An introductory chapter makes two important points. One is that "the life of *This Week* spans the decades in which broadcasting in the UK gave priority to public service principles" but the second point is that current affairs television on ITV required programme makers to think about the audience. This created conflicting pressures between commercial and non-commercial aims, between making accessible programmes and serious journalism, and so on. "At its most successful, the series was able to hold these conflicting pressures in balance and develop powerful journalism for a very broad audience" Pat Holland argues.

The Angry Buzz takes us through the various phases in *This Week's* life from 1956 until 1992. The value of the book lies in the reconstruction of *This Week's* contribution to ITV current affairs programming. The chapters on Northern Ireland are a painful reminder of the pressures on broadcasters who wanted to report on the conflict. Another chapter deals with *Death on the Rock*. As she points out, the programme, broadcast in April 1988, "led to the biggest row of the decade and its reverberations shook the television world". The chapter gives a clear overview of the events (including the shameful role of the Murdoch press).

The Angry Buzz is excellent, written in a clear, accessible style. It deserves to be widely read and discussed because the issues the book raises remain absolutely relevant to contemporary broadcasting policy debates.

BBC censorship?

BBC backtracks on promise to publish all submissions to their Israeli-Palestinian Impartiality Review.

When the BBC's Governors announced the setting up of the Israeli-Palestinian Impartiality review, they invited written submissions and said that all submissions would be published alongside the report of the Independent Panel.

Alan Hart, formerly an ITN and *Panorama* reporter and the author of *Zionism: The Real Enemy of the Jews*, was among those who accepted the BBC's assurance in a good faith and submitted a 30-page document, which he put together in consultation with a number of former BBC people. Alan was subsequently invited to give oral evidence to the Independent Panel. He has now been informed that a decision has been taken not to publish any submissions.

Says Alan: "The reason given for not publishing any submissions — 'concern about the defamatory nature of some of the material' (not mine) — is plain silly. The only term that comes into my mind to explain this BBC volte-face is censorship. The BBC is, of course, insisting that it's 'not censorship' and that the decision 'was not taken under pressure from anywhere.' Watch this space."

CPBF AGM

Saturday 8 July 10.00am - 1.00pm
(Registration and coffee from 9.30am)

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For further details contact the CPBF national Office or visit the web site at www.cpbf.org.uk

Levellers Day

Levellers Day is an event being held in Warwick Hall Garden, Burford, Oxfordshire on May 20.

Speakers include: Tony Benn, Karen Chouhan, Darcus Howe, Salma Yaqoob, chaired by Firoze Manji.

Entertainment, includes: Pressgang, Leon Rosselson, Robb Johnson and Red Rose Folk Band.

Tickets: All day £10/£6 concessions, pm only, £7.50/£5 concessions. Available online from www.wegotickets.com. For information, contact: Anne Lyons 01865 727731 marlox@btinternet.com or see www.levellers.org.uk

Reporting torture

Mainstream media coverage of the recent "extraordinary rendition" controversy shows that dominant myths surrounding British uses of torture are "alive and well", according to Professor John Tulloch, of the University of Lincoln.

In the latest issue of *Ethical Space: The International Journal of Communication Ethics*, Tulloch argues that "the comforting myth for the British and their leader writers is that torture was and is something done by other people".

Following an in-depth analysis of UK national daily and weekly newspapers' coverage of the CIA torture flights during December 2005, Tulloch concludes: "Although the explicit advocacy of torture still remains largely outside the pale, many editorial discussions alluded to moral ambiguity, and implicitly entertained the possibility that, in an imperfect world, there were circumstances in which torture was understandable, even if condonable, and something that should be done by morally inferior others. In this very British assumption of moral superiority, the dirty work of empire continues."

Ethical Space is available from the editor, Prof Richard Keeble, University of Lincoln, School of Journalism, Brayford Pool, Lincoln LN6 7TS; £5. The first volume of *ES* has just been published by Troubador as a book, *Communication Ethics Today*; see http://www.troubador.co.uk/book_info.asp?bookid=296

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

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