TOWARDS PRESS FREEDOM

30p

Campaign for Press Freedom

Campaign for Press Freedom

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STATEMENT OF AIMS

1. To challenge the myth that only private ownership of the newspaper industry provides genuine freedom, diversity or access, and to generate public debate on alternative forms of democratic ownership and control.

2. To carry out research into alternatives, including ownership by independent trusts or co-operatives, which would guarantee freedom from either state control or domination by major business conglomerates

3. To encourage the creation of alternative newspapers of all kinds including a newspaper or newspapers sympathetic to the Labour movement.

4. To encourage the development of industrial democracy in the newspaper, broadcasting and television industries.

5. To follow up the general principles contained in the Minority Report of the Royal Commission on the Press, including proposals for a National Printing Corporation to provide a competitive public sector in the printing industry and a launch fund to assist new publications.

6. To campaign for a reformed and reconstituted Press Council to promote basic standards of fairness and access to the press on behalf of the public.

7. To work for a reduction in legal restrictions on freedom of publication and increased access to official sources of information through reform of the Official Secrets Act and similar restrictive legislation and the introduction of a Freedom of Information Bill.

September 1979

INTRODUCTION

The most famous political comment about the British press, that 'it has power without responsibility – the prerogative of the harlot throughout the ages', was made by a Conservative Prime Minister, Stanley Baldwin, about Conservative Press Lords.

It is a curiosity that among the radical, liberal, socialist, trade union groupings of British society there has been, until very recently, little serious intellectual research or reforming activity on the question of the press.

Health, education, the arts have all been deemed suitable subjects for political debate and legislative reform. But the press, which plays a decisive role in shaping society and affects all our lives, has been left largely to its own devices.

The Campaign for Press Freedom has been launched to encourage debate about how press freedom can be extended. We do not accept that existing patterns of ownership, control and journalistic purpose of the press are the last word.

This pamphlet has been produced by the steering committee which launched the campaign. Our sponsors, whose support we deeply appreciate, and indeed individual members of the steering committee may not necessarily agree with every detail of what is written here.

Each one of them will inevitably attach different degrees of emphasis or importance to various points in the statement of aims, to which they have all nevertheless pledged their support. That is our basic policy statement.

In this pamphlet we do not aim to provide definitive answers. Each point in the statement of aims is expanded, but with the sole object of opening up further debate.

No single proposal presents the entire answer, but the implementation of any one of them would be a step in the direction of extending press freedom.

Some reforms could be introduced voluntarily; for example, the Press Council could, if it so desired, turn itself into a more effective body merely by implementing the modest suggestions about its role put forward in the 1977 Royal Commission on the Press. Other changes could be introduced through collective bargaining while ideas such as a National Print Corporation would need major legislation.

Concern about extending press freedom extends beyond the Labour and Liberal parties and the trade union movement. Pressure groups, campaigning organisations in the community, radicals, women, blacks and the disadvantaged share a need to see a more open press, more accessible to wider currents of news and views.

An increasing number of journalists and printworkers find distasteful the way in which their professional talents and craft skills are used (and abused) by the current system of ownership and control.

The Campaign for Press Freedom has set itself a programme of research work and public debate to last at least the lifetime of the current parliament. Groups will be set up and seminars and conferences arranged. Individual members are welcome to join and larger groups or organisations can become affiliated.

The question of press freedom has been left undebated save in terms of defending and exalting the current narrowly-based system of private, unaccountable ownership.

There are many questions to be raised and many possible answers. But the debate should begin now.

Steering Committee: James Curran, Jake Ecclestone, Ken Fleet, Harold Frayman, John Jennings, Bill Keys, John Lloyd, Denis MacShane, Michael Meacher MP, John Mitchell, Steve Radford, Donald Ross, Dave White.

The myth of press freedom

1 To challenge the myth that only private ownership of the newspaper industry provides genuine freedom, diversity or access, and to generate public debate on alternative forms of democratic ownership and control.

It is one of the conventional complacencies of British life that we have a free press. It is constantly asserted as though it were almost self-evident, and we are regularly abjured to protect it. But is it really true?

The first question to ask must be: what are the defining characteristics of a free press? Now the role of the press in a democracy should be to inform the public on the issues on which they have to base their choice. It follows from this that a 'free' press is one where all significant sections of opinion in society have the freedom and opportunity to present their views for public information on all the major issues for democratic choice. Does this definition apply to the British press?

There are two ways of answering this question. One is to examine the structure of ownership of the press and the influence this has on the views expressed. The other is to look at the evidence of how a variety of issues are treated, to see how far a range and diversity of views are really offered.

On the first point, the outstanding fact is that the number of newspapers is steadily contracting, and even more importantly, ownership is becoming concentrated into fewer and fewer hands. Three vast corporations – Reed International, the Thomson Organisation and News International – now produce no less than 80% of all the national daily and Sunday papers in Britain.

Furthermore, for six of the nine national newspapers, ultimate control rests with a single individual or with a family or their trusts. Only in the case of Reed International owning the *Daily Mirror, Sunday Mirror* and *The People* are the shares widely held. The net result is that a handful of extremely rich men – Lord Hartwell *(Daily Telegraph)*, Lord Thomson *(The Times* and *Sunday Times)*, Lord Gibson *(Financial Times)*, Viscount Rothermere *(Daily Mail)*, Mr. Victor Matthews *(Daily Express)*, Mr. Rupert Murdoch *(The Sun)*, and Atlantic Richfield (a Canadian-based oil multinational now owning *The Observer*) – between them control most of the newspapers sold to the British people.

In addition, these controllers of national newspapers are very closely linked with the publishers of provincial newspapers, where concentration of ownership is even tighter. Thomson Regional Newspapers (a subsidiary of the Thomson Organisation), Westminster Press (a subsidiary of S. Pearson & Son which owns the *Financial Times*), and Associated Newspapers Group (which owns the *Daily Mail*) are the largest provincial newspaper publishers. Together with two other groups, United Newspapers and the Iliffe family interests, these five companies own 52 daily and over 200 weekly newspapers.

What all this means is that the publication and discussion of major national (and even many local) issues is the perquisite of a very few, very rich businessmen. And not at all surprisingly, their newspapers accurately reflect the views, values, ideologies and prejudices of this tiny clique.

It is this gross unrepresentativeness of the views and slant of presentation day after day projected in both the views and opinion columns, rather than the fact that all these newspaper owners are dedicated supporters of the Conservative Party (though that happens to be the case), which forces one to conclude that, in terms of the definition we have used, we do not have a free press in Britain.

The second criterion we noted for establishing whether or not there is a free press turned on the empirical question of how various issues were actually treated. Are both sides of the issue fairly discussed? Does the prominence given to particular issues, or the playing down or even omission of them, reasonably accord with what might be expected to be the priorities of the majority of readers? Is the full range of minority interests properly catered for by features of due (even if minority) prominence?

Let us look at the evidence on these points. First, perhaps nowhere does the question of doing justice to both sides of the argument come up more sharply than over the question of industrial relations. Here a careful reading of the press reveals a subtle but distinct anti-trade union code.

How often one sees such headlines as 'Industry faces state grab in new TUC plan'. Yet one never sees 'Workers face job threat from multinational takeover grab.' Trade union leaders are regularly asked in the media 'What are you doing to end this strike?' and 'Isn't it true that not all your members want to strike?' Management on the other hand are asked about the effect on production or exports, not about how far their decisions may have caused the strike in the first place. The subtle innuendo is put across – trade unions cause strikes.

Secondly, is the prominence, high or low, given to particular issues broadly fair? Ceaselessly during 1977–79 the press concentrated the searchlight in Stages 3 and 4 on wage claims. Perfectly fair. But why is almost nothing said on the other side of the social contract about the strike of capital, far more worrying long-term, and the non-recovery of manufacturing investment, still 8% last year (1978) in real terms below the level in 1970?

Again, the press is constantly sniping at 'scroungers'. And of course those who abuse the Welfare State should be penalised. But why does the press at the same time almost totally ignore the injustices of rampant inequalities in our society, both the hardships of the long-term unemployed, one-parent families and low wage-earners and the abuse of top management perks on the other side? There are many, many similar examples.

Thirdly, is a decent range of minority interests properly represented? It is difficult to believe it is. For how then can one explain why all our major national newspapers supported American action in Vietnam, why all support public spending cuts in economic crises, why all eventually favoured British entry to the Common Market, why all (except the *Mirror*) support British troops remaining in Northern Ireland, why all supported Jim Callaghan against Michael Foot in the Labour Party leadership election, and so on? Nobody could claim that the opposite of each of these views does not command significant minority (or even majority!) support in the country.

Those who hold views different from the prevailing consensus therefore find it very difficult, if not impossible, to get a proper hearing for their views – and even when their views *are* presented, it is often in a form designed to attract ridicule. Those who are constantly penalised in this way are workers, women, blacks, the poor, tenants, campaigners, especially those raising awkward issues like Northern Ireland or Rhodesia.

The evidence then on both counts – the influence of ownership and the analysis of content – is therefore quite clear: the claim that we have a free press in Britain is a myth. But it is not enough simply to assert this, however badly it needs asserting. What now is desperately needed is a major public debate on what changes, legislative or otherwise, are needed to create a press in Britain that is genuinely free.

Alternative ownership

2 To carry out research into alternatives, including ownership by independent trusts or co-operatives, which would guarantee freedom from either state control or domination by major business conglomerates.

The assumption, widely held and rarely challenged, that press freedom is somehow dependent on a capitalist system of ownership has been incorporated into the ideological underpinning of our society. Because of its importance in protecting those who presently exercise control over our media, any attempt to stimulate debate on alternative forms of ownership is likely to be resisted, or derided, or ignored.

It is a precondition of a healthier and more varied and open press that workers in the media should be provoked into a serious debate on the issues – and that they should recognise that new forms of ownership and control can be compatible with their professional requirements. It is becoming harder for many journalists to reconcile the sort of pressures they are exposed to in their everyday work with the standards of objectivity, balance and so on which they set for themselves. As the veneer of concern for editorial freedom wears thinner among those who own and manage so much of our press, so the contradictions between reality and aspiration provide the necessary starting point for a debate among journalists on alternatives.

That said, however, the enormity of the task should be faced. The closure of Times Newspapers, to take an obvious example, prevented more than 450 journalists from doing their normal work; there was no surge of interest in alternatives. A preliminary study into the possibility of setting up a co-operative was commissioned by the NUJ chapel at *The Times*, but the report – encouraging though it was – was received with a polite but indifferent nod. A follow-up meeting, including expert advice from France, attracted a mere 10 per cent of the editorial staffs.

Given that the closure of the five *Times* titles was an act of capitalist vandalism on a grand scale – demonstrating yet again the deep attachment of multinational oil companies to press freedom – it might have been thought these were optimum conditions for a debate by journalists and their influential readers into possible alternatives. The actual lack of interest was stunning, and may be attributed to a variety of reasons.

Fear of rocking the boat was one reason people kept quiet; the gentleman-of-leisure syndrome was another (journalists were still on the payroll). Then there was the faint but alluring prospect of redundancy payments if things went badly wrong, and no doubt some remembered the sad but spectacular failure of the *Scottish Daily News* co-operative (see below). As a background to all this was the general public scepticism of co-operatives, the journalistic varieties of which tend to be regarded as either cranky or subversive, or both.

Yet it is clear that newspapers and broadcasting can be controlled in ways which are not conventionally capitalist without necessarily sacrificing any of the freedom or variety which proprietors and editors so vociferously proclaim.

The study carried out for *The Times* journalists was largely devoted to the experience of three newspaper co-operatives in France, the best known of which was *Le Monde*, the most outstanding serious French paper with a circulation of over 450,000 a day. Along with other groups of employees, journalists on *Le Monde* have gained effective control of the paper and its policies, this last exercised through an editorial committee.

The journalists' 40 per cent shareholding in a company requiring 75 per cent of shareholders' votes on all main policy decisions has brought responsibilities as well as power. But, significantly, both journalists and chief executive agree that the effect of the power structure has been to strengthen and safeguard editorial independence.

The study went on to note that, although it was acknowledged that advertisers' interests could never be completely ignored, *Le Monde* 'saw itself as being free to be much more objective and even-handed than a capitalist newspaper on issues which traditionally divide capital and labour.'

A further significant gain from non-capitalist ownership structures has been the elimination of profit-maximisation as the underlying motive. Although it is necessary to make hard commercial decisions in order to stay alive, co-operatives perforce must aim at stability of employment and improvements in the quality of the working life.

Thus, whereas the introduction of new printing technology in Britain has been accompanied in many cases by industrial upheaval and conflict, the three French newspaper co-operatives are achieving much the same result without any great traumas to people or production.

The situation in Britain is bleak but not without promise. There is of course the BBC which, for all its faults, is a massive example of non-capitalist ownership – a factor, perhaps, behind the angry reaction to Tony Benn's suggestion regarding a takeover of *The Times*. Although it is clear that the BBC is subject to increasing interference and pressure from government and Whitehall, its editorial independence still stands well in comparison with some of our national newspapers owned by millionaires or conglomerates.

There is, too, the limited but welcome success of co-operative ventures like *The Leveller* and *Spare Rib*, now into its eighth year. These, taken together with other, smaller magazines, point to a climate of opinion increasingly weary of the bland trivialities of our capitalist press.

The co-operative idea extends beyond national papers or radical magazines. In Crawley, Sussex, the *Crawley News* is flourishing as a workers co-operative with twelve staff, a weekly circulation of 12,000 and editions of 36 pages. In Nottingham the *Nottingham News*, born out of the victimisation of 28 journalists on the *Nottingham Evening Post* has established itself as a successful weekly.

Where a newspaper has a local monopoly, as is the case in the majority of towns and cities, it may be desirable to legislate for the possibility of the workers on that paper voting for it to be turned into a trust. (Trusts already control the *Guardian*, and the *Observer*.)

On the other hand, research, which is clearly needed, may show that it is futile trying to convert existing structures to some form or another of worker control or participation. Better, perhaps, to stimulate and support new projects which begin life unencumbered with outworn attitudes.

In a completely different field the success of the real ale movement over the last 10 years shows how vulnerable big business can be when it subordinates the interests of the consumer to the accountant and the shareholder.

Anyone who cares for the health of our press must feel alarm at the steady concentration of ownership and its diminishing variety and liveliness. That process can only be halted and reversed by a campaign to ensure that the freedom and vitality of our media become a reality rather than a tired cliché.

A Labour newspaper?

3 To encourage the creation of alternative newspapers of all kinds including a newspaper or newspapers sympathetic to the Labour movement.

Britain needs more papers. That is not just the view of a minority of radicals, socialists and trade unionists deprived of a national audience for their views, but the view of successive Royal Commissions on the Press. The need, political rather than commercial, for a Labour daily is accepted even by the chairman of Times Newspapers.

A national Labour daily is not a new idea and there is no doubt that it would be

welcomed by very many people, including many supporters of the Campaign for Press Freedom. But in pursuing the dream we must also ask a number of questions, with answers which have very serious implications.

Who would pay for this new paper? Even if the paper were able to overcome the difficulty with advertisers, which closed the *Daily Herald,* left the *Scottish Daily News* with no chance, and keeps the *Morning Star* to a restricted role, the new paper would have to find the initial capital investment, running costs for a substantial period and the cost of promotion.

If readers are going to get a full and adequate news service from the new paper its founders will have to raise tens of millions of pounds. Who can afford it? Certainly no political party, probably not a national appeal, but possibly the trade unions.

It is very easy to win support for the simply-stated common aim of a national daily. But what sort of an alternative daily paper are we after? Would it be looking for a mass circulation (and if so, how would it differ from the *Daily Mirror?* Where would it get its readers?) or would it aim for a 'quality' readership? Would it have a political position of its own and if so which one? Would its paymasters – the trade unions, for example – be prepared to hand over large sums of money and relinquish their right to editorial control? And if not, how does that square with notions of internal industrial democracy, which this campaign wants to see developed?

Above all, perhaps, would a paper owned by trade unions or a political party now be able to overcome a widespread prejudice among readers that only owners with an interest in profit can produce an honest paper?

How far are sales of the *Morning Star, Socialist Worker,* and *Labour Weekly* compressed because readers, to a certain extent fairly, cannot believe they are anything other than the mouthpieces of their respective parties?

And if, despite all this, it is possible to reach agreement on the nature of the paper, to find the necessary cash support, and secure for its workers a framework of industrial democracy – if after all that the paper still cannot raise a significant circulation, what then?

If such a paper, mopping up all the available cash, went to the wall, what would be the chance of trying anything else?

And if it did succeed in keeping its head above water, would we all be satisfied?

It can be argued that the project would be risky, unsatisfactory and could ruin for the forseeable future any chance of new daily papers offering a political alternative.

Some of these questions need to be asked about a paper funded by a national appeal, but the most obvious question remains whether it would be practical. Perhaps it is, particularly if the sponsors and supporters were prepared to take a long time waiting for the result – say seven years or more, encouraging supporters to take out covenants (a million covenants of £2 each for seven years would just about raise £20 million). Is any one of us prepared to wait that long?

If TUC-affiliated unions levied their members 1p week that would produce a launch fund of £18 million over three years. This solution could solve one of the biggest difficulties: the cost of launching and continuing to run a daily national paper.

But we should not underestimate the difficulties and it would still be a major undertaking. Perhaps we should shift our focus to provincial papers.

They are dramatically cheaper to launch and run. They are regularly more profitable, in terms of capital employed, than national papers. Rather than concentrating the cash for a national daily on one venture it might be possible to translate that into the cash to launch half a dozen or more provincial papers. If different people or organisations wanted different political approaches, different experiments in industrial democracy, it should be possible to offer that.

It might even be possible to raise more money. Whatever the formal arrangement of power there can be little doubt that the biggest cash sponsors *would* exercise the greatest power. Organisations with relatively little money to throw behind an alternative press could place it where they would derive tangible benefit – the political parties and trade unions are far from being the only people who feel they get a raw deal from the existing press.

Cash raised by local appeal might be greater if it offered in return a measure of local control.

Even without the substantial investment necessary for a full-scale news operation, it is possible to launch local newspapers – from the amateur community papers, through the more familiar-looking *Nottingham News* to journals like *Time Out,* which began as an extremely modest diary of events.

There would, in fact, be additional advantages – in providing a flow of news to each other and the national press these papers would have an immediate impact on existing dailies. The profit and experience would be a sound basis for launching the national daily, or dailies, which are so desired.

But would these papers be as successful as their counterparts owned by the big corporations? Could they overcome the hostility of their competitors to achieve a survivable circulation? Would your local community be prepared to read and buy a new, alternative paper? Would the potential sponsors with the most available cash even look at the idea – or would it be beneath their interest?

Until now the debate on launching an alternative press has concentrated almost exclusively on the need for a Labour daily. The wide agreement on the need has sadly produced little public debate on the practicality and no public proposals for a new paper. The outstanding question now is whether the discussion can be taken further forward, to the point where the creation of new newspapers becomes a practical possibility.

Industrial democracy

4 To encourage the development of industrial democracy in the newspaper, broadcasting and television industries.

Industrial democracy, a powerful current in the early part of this century, was given a new lease of life under the last Labour Government. Initiatives included:

- the report of the Committee on Industrial Democracy (Bullock), which recommended that elected representatives of the workforce become directors of major companies
- the funding of a number of workers' co-operatives, including Meriden (motor cycles), Kirkby (central heating) and the *Scottish Daily News*
- the adoption of 'Bullock-style' boards at national, regional and local levels in the Post Office, one of the country's largest employers.

However the idea of industrial democracy as a mode of organisation in the press has received little attention during the last five years: the notable exception was the case of the *Scottish Daily News,* which received a great deal. Since it is the only substantial, daily newspaper study so far which may be drawn from life, it is worth some thought.

The *Scottish Daily News* was formed by the staff of the *Scottish Daily Express,* which closed down its substantial Glasgow plant in March 1974. The *News,* which came out in May 1975, ran six months until October of the same year.

While it was generally considered to have been unsuccessful as a newspaper on every level – financially, politically, journalistically – its experience pointed up a number of valuable lessons for those who work in the press.

First, its workers were able both to organise support for their co-operative and to launch and run the paper without the managerial and financial support which it had been accustomed to, and with the loss of many senior editorial staff.

Second, under the pressure of events, printworkers and journalists came together in an initially effective way to plan and to organise production. Craft jealousies, commonly assumed to be insuperable, were for a time largely absent: a common wage was paid to all.

Third, the venture attracted support from many workers in the press, and throughout the Labour movement. Clearly, then, co-operative working on a newspaper is a possibility: a newspaper *was* produced, daily, with a circulation of many thousands.

It is clear, too, that the *Scottish Daily News* can hardly be used as a model – so what went wrong?

In the first place, the new paper faced extraordinary difficulties. The paper's market share was declining, and it had been showing £18,000 a week losses for its previous owner, Beaverbrook (now Express) Newspapers. The *News*, though changed somewhat from the *Express* in content and style, inevitably inherited decline. Many of those who could find jobs in other newspapers, or elsewhere, did.

The *Scottish Daily Express* did not cease to publish: it merely pulled back its printing base to Manchester. In the event, it held the bulk of its circulation. Advertisers, unsure of the new paper's circulation and nervous about its political line, dropped away. Advertising industry figures show that advertising dropped from £68,000 worth in May 1975 to £28,000 in August; figures which, when coupled with sliding circulation, provoked a cash flow crisis from which the *News* could not recover.

The paper's editorial line was also never satisfactorily resolved. Like advertising, it was presumed to emerge. There was apparent general agreement that the paper was left of centre, and that line did come through sporadically in editorials. But there was no consistent attempt to regard the paper as an editorial whole, nor to break away from, or improve upon, the standard popular journalistic modes.

Before attempting to draw conclusions from this, it is worth looking briefly at a more often quoted (because successful) example, *Le Monde*, the Parisian evening paper. *Le Monde*, accepted by many as France's leading paper (and as a world leader, too) was founded after the second war by a group of journalists active in the liberation movement. 'Journalist' is the key category here: while there is a co-operative management of sorts, non-editorial staff play a much smaller part in it than do journalists.

Again, it is probably fair to say that its founder and long-time editor, Hubert Beuve-Mery, acquired a sufficient prestige within and outside of his journal to allow him to run it with a good deal of independence. Finally, a decision was taken from the outset that the editorial line of the paper would be, as far as is possible, objective and balanced, a policy which continues with success.

What conclusions can be drawn from the above, and what further comments can usefully be made?

Industrial democracy has not yet been accepted, either in principle or in practice, by management in the media, and it does not appear to have been seriously demanded by the unions. When industrial democracy comes to the fore again as a demand made by the Labour movement, it may be expected to come up, possibly tardily, in the newspaper industry.

The industry would certainly benefit from workers' representation at decision-making levels. Overt proprietorial control has again become a feature of Fleet Street (though not in every paper): unlike the previous strong owners (Beaverbrook, Rothermere), the new barons (Matthews, Murdoch, Goldsmith) are heads of large organisations with diverse, often multinational interests. In the provinces, large groups dominate the market.

It is clear that these groups, while naturally interested in running popular and profitable enterprises, would regard individual units as dispensable under certain circumstances, these circumstances quite possibly being where continued production could be viable under different ownership or in a different form.

Worker directors, able to influence corporate strategies, could both argue for continued production where that was in doubt, and face problems of company withdrawal before large damage to readership and staff morale was done. Further, their influence on policy would cease to be merely negative – withdrawal of labour – and could become positive – exercise of authority.

The argument has been, and will be, advanced that such arrangements would destroy the paper's editorial independence. It cannot be too often stated that no editor, except an editor/owner, is wholly independent. It is, of course, true that many editors have established a general freedom to set policy and standards: but they do so within limits defined, overtly or tacitly, by the owner(s). In this context, industrial democracy is an attempt to have workers assist in defining these limits.

As well as industrial democracy at board level and as expressed through the creation of workers' co-operatives (see the earlier section of the pamphlet) it is useful to consider introducing mechanisms to increase editorial democracy as distinct from the management of production capacity.

Clearly editorial autonomy cannot extend indefinitely in the chain of editorial production on a newspaper or in a television or radio station. It will be necessary at some stages to have someone who has the authority to say we lead on that story, or drop that picture or re-write that headline. The question is to whom is that person accountable.

One pattern for an editorial committee would give it the following functions:

1. To meet every month to hear a report from the editor, to consider general newspaper policy, the line taken in editorials, major investigations and overall news coverage.
2. To have the right of veto and a representative(s) on the appointments board for senior editorial appointments.
3. To decide major changes in the newspaper's form and content.
4. To act as a receiving post for readers' complaints with the power to have retractions printed.

The selection of such an editorial committee is a matter for the journalists and other workers inside each newsroom or production office. Easy safeguards against control by an unrepresentative minority could be introduced by making a third of the committee step down each year, rotating officers, and allowing for a fresh election on petition of a percentage of the workforce.

Media Culture and Society

Managing Editors
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This major, new, international journal will provide an important forum for the presentation of research and discussion across the whole field of cultural practice. The main focus will be on the mass media (television, radio, journalism) within their political, cultural and historical contexts. Their relationship to literature, the visual and performing arts, photography, publishing, and to more general artistic and cultural practices is of central reference to the journal. Each issue will contain a core of thematically linked articles – the first issue taking the subject of the media and politics. This journal will be essential reading for students and researchers of the media and mass communications, as well as for practitioners and members of the public who are concerned with communications.

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The minority report

5 To follow up the general principles contained in the Minority Report of the Royal Commission on the Press, including proposals for a National Printing Corporation to provide a competitive public sector in the printing industry and a launch fund to assist new publications.

The cost of publishing is so prohibitive that only a narrow range of interests are able to exercise the much-vaunted 'freedom of the press' in the commercial market. The last Royal Commission on the Press estimated for instance, that it would cost £2–3 million to establish a local evening paper in a town without direct competition: the cost of establishing a competitive national paper would be, of course, much greater. Even the relatively modest proposition of setting up a local weekly was costed by the Commission at £100,000.

The heavy cost of publishing is only partly due to the cost of plant and machinery. (In some cases, printing can be done by contract with another publisher or printer). A substantial part of the cost of starting up in publishing is due to the heavy losses incurred before a publication recruits a substantial number of readers and advertisements on a scale comparable to long established papers in the field. If we are to extend the freedom to publish to new groups and interests not represented in the commercial press, we must increase access not merely to printing facilities but also to the capital needed to compete in publishing.

For over half a century, there has been a steady reduction in the number and diversity of competing newspapers. This shrinkage of consumer choice is partly due to the economic difficulties of starting newspapers in the commercial market. It is also the consequence of powerful economic forces that make for less diversity in the press industry.

Minority papers usually cost more to produce than larger-circulation rivals which derive substantial economies from longer print runs; they usually also attract less advertising than papers selling more copies in the same market. These two factors – economies of scale and unequal advertising allocation – have played a crucial role in steadily eroding the diversity of the press.

If we are to permanently expand the diversity of the press, we need to offset the advantages conferred by size and advertising success. Helping new papers on to the market is not enough: it is necessary to equalise the rules of competition so that the weak are not automatically eliminated by the strong. Some people favour reform of the press but draw back at the thought of public intervention. Government involvement in the offices of the press will open the door, it is argued, to government censorship of the press. Better the devil we know than the Orwellian nightmare of a state-controlled press that might develop from public regulation.

This argument, in its simplest form, becomes an excuse for doing nothing. It ignores the fact that government agencies are already heavily involved in the whole area of communications – in education, public libraries, the production and subsidy of films, the BBC and extensive public regulation of commercial broadcasting. While the history of education and broadcasting, in particular, shows that government involvement can produce problems, few people would deny that British education and broadcasting have both benefitted from not being left entirely in private hands. Early fears of political censorship have proved exaggerated, while public regulation has provided a service better than that which would have emerged from the so called 'free market'.

Britain is now one of the few countries in Europe where the state does not play a positive role in encouraging press diversity. A variety of different schemes have been introduced in France, Italy, Sweden, Netherlands, Norway, Finland, Belgium and Austria: in none of these countries has state economic intervention in the press industry led to government control or editorial censorship.

The most developed of these schemes has been evolved in Sweden during the last decade. A complex system of grants and subsidies has been introduced including discriminatory grants to encourage co-operation between papers in production, distribution and advertising, and a launch fund for the establishment of new papers. The substantial cost of this support programme has been defrayed, in part, by a press advertising tax.

While these measures – particularly those involving selective aid to publications – encountered considerable opposition to start with, this opposition has largely disappeared and the press support programme now has all-party support in Sweden. Fears of government censorship proved unfounded, while the new measures have manifestly succeeded in maintaining and extending freedom of expression in the press.

Against the background of progressive public intervention in the press industry, the last Royal Commission on the press contained a minority report written by David Basnett and Geoffrey Goodman which proposed a National Printing Corporation and a launch fund for new publications. Its recommendations have given new impetus to the debate about public intervention in the press in Britain, and have been incorporated in the proposals below.

1. An *Open Press Authority* (OPA) could be established as a public agency responsible for administering the press support programme outlined here. It would be accountable to parliament and include in its membership at least one representative from the principal political parties, two representatives from a reformed Press Council as well as representatives from the Newspaper Publishers Association, Newspaper Society, journalists and print unions.
2. The Open Press Authority could administer a *launch fund* to assist the establishment of new publications comparable to the launch fund administered by the press subsidies council in Sweden. As in the case of Sweden, certain rules would limit the use of these funds.

First, the OPA would not be able to decide whether or not a paper was 'worth' starting. That judgement must be reserved to the publishers themselves. The OPA would assess, however, on the basis of expert advice whether the proposed launch had any prospect of succeeding. Secondly, the OPA would not assume all the financial risk: part of the economic risk involved should be borne by the publishers. Third, in order to discourage speculative establishments the support would be disbursed in the form of interest-free and amortisation-free loans, which would then be remitted if the paper qualified for production subsidies after its first year on the market.

Fourth, loans would only be made available to newspapers (defined in terms of proportion of space devoted to news) and not to magazines and periodicals. Last, support would only be given to newspapers launched in competition against existing newspapers under a different ownership.

3. The Open Press Authority might also administer *production grants* to assist small circulation newspapers. This subsidy would be allocated on principles similar to the production grants administered in Norway and Sweden – i.e. 'in accordance with automatically functionary rules', 'irrespective of the management or the contents of the papers'.

These criteria could include a minimum, audited circulation qualification so that the paper was able to demonstrate a measurable level of public demand; a ceiling in terms of market share so as to exclude publications enjoying substantial scale economies and advertising receipts; and qualifying characteristics as a newspaper to exclude magazines and periodicals. The production grants would take the form of cash paid on the basis of tonnage of newsprint consumed up to a maximum set by the authority.

4. The Open Press Authority could be responsible for the creation of a *National Printing Corporation.* This would be a competitive public sector in the printing industry which would make full use of new technology and would extend access to modern printing facilities in areas where there is no spare capacity.
5. The Open Press Authority could also have a significant role to play in the context of strength and *anti-monopoly legislation* directed against concentration of media ownership. New measures should be introduced that prohibit joint ownership of newspapers and commercial radio or TV companies; and new guidelines need to be drawn up that not only effectively restrain new mergers but which tackle existing concentrations of ownership, requiring divestiture where any group controls more than 75% of specified markets.

Where this results in the sale of a

newspaper, the OPA should be empowered to provide financial assistance in the form of loans to co-operatives composed of staff employed on the newspaper providing it is satisfied that the new venture has a reasonable chance of success.

6. The Open Press Authority could be financed out of public resources. It would be underwritten, in part, however by the imposition of a duty on media advertising expenditure. Since this duty would apply to all media, it would not have the damaging consequences of encouraging a substantial drift of advertising away from the press that might arise in the case of a duty limited only to press advertising.

Reform of the Press Council

6 To campaign for a reformed and reconstituted Press Council, to promote basic standards of fairness and access to the press on behalf of the public.

The Press Council is an embarrassing failure. It is embarrassing to the newspaper industry (the Press Council does not cover broadcasting) which created it to sponge up complaints from the public only to see the public largely ignore it and pay no attention to its findings. It is a failure for newspaper readers who were promised when the Press Council was set up in 1953 that the standards of journalism would improve and that the basic character of the British press which at that time included socialist and radical newspapers like the *Daily Herald* and *News Chronicle* would be preserved.

The Press Council covers the entire spectrum of the British press and periodical industry. There are sixteen Fleet Street newspapers, a little over a thousand provincial daily and weekly newspaper titles, and five thousand regular magazines being published each year.

In 1976, out of the millions of news and comment pieces published, only 534 complaints were received by the Press Council. Of those 534 *only 34 complaints were upheld.* Even the most devoted admirer of British newspapers and magazines might be surprised to learn that the Press Council could find only 34 instances of journalism that merited rebuke.

The Press Council prides itself on laying down general principles for the improvement of journalism, the most famous of which was the outlawing of cheque-book journalism after the notorious Moors Murder trial in the mid 1960s. The behaviour of newspapers at the time of the Thorpe trial showed the irrelevance of such Press Council policy statements.

The *Sunday Telegraph* bought up one prosecution witness, Peter Bessell for £25,000 with the promise of a further £25,000 if Thorpe was found guilty! The Press Council announcement that it was going to investigate the newspaper behaviour during the Thorpe trial was greeted with hollow laughter in Fleet Street.

The Press Council has 36 members – 18 'lay' and 18 appointed from the newspaper industry plus a chairman – usually a legal luminary. Those from the newspaper industry are made up as follows: NUJ 4, Institute of Journalists (a small, right-wing organisation) 2, Newspaper Society (federation of provincial proprietors) 3, national Newspaper Publishers' Association 3, periodical publishers' association 2, Scots weekly and daily proprietors 2, Guild of Editors (an organisation to which some provincial editors belong and part-financed by the Newspaper Society) 2.

The NUJ which represents 31,000 working journalists has just four members. It is faced with a line-up of 12 management representatives (14 if the pro-management IOJ is included). According to one NUJ member of the Press Council: 'they (the rest of the newspaper side) approach their deliberations with the same social and political attitudes, the same general outlook on life with which they approach their work as owners, editors and managers.'

The 18 lay members are chosen by an appointments panel which is itself selected by the Press Council. It is a closed circle of patronage. The lay members are meant to be a cross-section of society. Yet all are white, middle-class and middle-aged. It is a cross-section of society which has no blacks, no students, no train-drivers or miners, no single-parents.

The Press Council is financed by the newspaper industry. The proprietors put up 90 per cent of the annual £200,000 it costs to run. Why such altruism? The Press Council provides the proprietors with a figleaf of ethical concern behind which they are shielded from criticism of the worst features of British journalism – political bias and distortion, racial intolerance and prejudice, the continuing trivialisation of personal relationships and the glamorising of crime.

Most newspapers are adept at tucking away Press Council adjudications in inside pages, and giving them ignorable headlines so that when the Press Council does pluck up courage to rap an offending newspaper over the knuckles the touch is featherlight.

The 1977 Royal Commission on the Press was sharply critical of the Press Council. It recommended that the Press Council should draw up a written Code of Conduct; it wanted adjudications published on the front page of offending newspapers; the Press Council should consider inaccuracy and bias as sufficient grounds for censure and that a complaint should be considered even when the complainant has already criticised the offending piece. Even these modest suggestions from the extremely moderate RCP were rejected by the Press Council.

The Press Council commands little respect inside the industry and almost none from the public at large, especially working people. The NUJ is unhappy about the composition and performance of the Press Council and its 1979 annual conference decided to set up a national working party to investigate and report on the Press Council. If the Press Council ignores the NUJ's findings there will be strong pressure inside the union to pull out.

In a recent *Guardian* article Tom Baistow, one of Fleet Street's most respected newspaper commentator's described the Press Council as a watchdog with 'rubber teeth'.

So, what can be done? That the Press Council needs major reform is generally accepted. The first area is finance. While the newspaper proprietors pay the Press Council piper they will call its tune. A small levy on advertising revenue could provide a source of independent finance. Press Council adjudications should be published on the front page with a duly prominent headline. The NUJ Code of Conduct should be adopted as an all-industry code of professional practice with particular emphasis laid on Clause 4 – *A journalist shall rectify promptly any harmful inaccuracies, ensure that correction and apologies receive due prominence and afford the right of reply to persons criticised when the issue is of sufficient importance.*

Press Council meetings should be open to the public and it should hold open meetings in London and throughout the country to discuss press performance. Membership needs to be reformed so that on the newspaper industry side there is at least equality between workers (including non-journalist workers) and management and, on the lay side, a much greater demographic spread so as to reflect more proportionately class, sex, racial and socio-economic differences in the community at large.

It would be better if these Press Council reforms were introduced voluntarily. But when one examines the history of the Press Council it becomes clear how irrelevant its 'voluntary' nature has been in extending press freedom or giving the public any adequate means of redress. Newspaper proprietors preach a hatred of any government involvement but happily accept zero VAT rating on newspapers, beg for newsprint subsidies, and co-operate with the government in D notice committees to shield certain areas of government activity from journalistic investigation.

Is it not time for the journalists, other newspaper workers and the concerned public to consider seriously the need to call in the power of parliament to redress the immense power of the media? The House of Commons is still an infinitely more democratic and accountable place than the closed committee rooms of the Newspaper Publishers' Associations, the Newspaper Society or the Press Council itself.

A reformed Press Council with sharpened teeth still will not go far enough to satisfy all the problems arising from the need to increase external press accountability.

In the United States some newspapers have appointed internal ombudsmen – journalists whose job is to take up public

complaints and with considerable professional inside knowhow see if the public complaint is valid and, if so, secure a correction or apology. In Sweden there is a government appointed Press Ombudsman with powers to compel apologies.

Newspapers could be obliged to set aside a minimum amount of space in each issue, say a tabloid page, for outside contributions and to increase the amount of space for letters. Clause 4 of the NUJ Code of Conduct stressing the journalistic obligation of a right of reply needs vigorous enforcement.

Different groups in the community – women's groups, trades councils, tenants' associations, playgroup organisations – could be approached to contribute articles or sets of articles.

Newspapers could hold public meetings every quarter at which the editor and senior executives would justify or explain coverage.

A massive increase in external accountability is nothing that honest and fair journalists and editors need fear. The opposition to these ideas and others that are put forward will be from those who see newspapers as an individual property right with a clear ideological mission.

Freedom of information

7 To work for a reduction in legal restrictions on freedom of publication and increased access to official sources of information through reform of the Official Secrets Act and similar restrictive legislation and the introduction of a Freedom of Information Bill.

Knowledge is power. That is why the government – any government – is anxious to avoid the spread of knowledge about its activities. It is also why government, privately-owned firms and public corporations employ regiments of public relations and press officers to erect a smokescreen of obfuscating helpfulness between their activities and journalists' enquiries and why they ruthlessly use the libel and contempt of court laws to stop investigative reporting.

The Official Secrets Act is the government's chief weapon in restricting information. All three stages were rushed through parliament on a Friday afternoon in 1911 at the height of a German spy scare. Since then every government employee has had to sign it and it has been increasingly used against journalists.

The catch-all nature of Section 2 of the Official Secrets Act which makes it an offence for journalists even to receive information (this allowed the government to prosecute journalists Crispin Aubrey and Duncan Campbell merely for having a conversation with a former soldier, John Berry, even though nothing was published of the conversation) has now been so discredited that both the past and present government are willing to replace it with a measure that will avoid embarrassing prosecutions of journalists but still keep civil servants on a tight rein.

In former Labour Home Secretary Merlyn Rees's chillingly Freudian phrase: 'We propose replacing a blunderbuss with an Armalite.' Still lined up in the weapon's sights will be, ultimately, the public's right to know.

Clearly any state will want, and is entitled, to keep certain security facts a secret. But such secrecy should be kept in perspective. In June 1978 it was revealed that Britain only had 74 'front-line' aircraft to defend the country in the event of an attack. It was a major military secret. The source for the story which was given to the Press Association was a senior RAF officer in the Ministry of Defence and was part of an airforce propaganda campaign for increased military spending. Although Prime Minister Jim Callaghan spluttered angrily about 'mischievous leaks' no-one was prosecuted under the Official Secrets Act.

The Official Secrets Act covers far more than defence. When the last government's cabinet decision to avoid its commitment to bring in a child benefit scheme was leaked to *New Society* the writer involved could have been prosecuted under the Act – if he or she had been identified. Unions with members in public service have complained that their members cannot take part fully in public debate about issues such as planning decisions, new Post Office technology, hospital and school closures or social security provisions because of fear of the Official Secrets Act.

The repeal of the Act – all of it, not just Section 2 – and its replacement with a simple measure protecting vital national security secrets such as exists in the United States and Sweden is major libertarian priority.

We need to go further and place on government and public authorities a statutory obligation to make information available to the public. A Freedom of Imformation Bill should be a priority for the next Labour government. Models exist in other countries, notably the United States, which allow the public or journalists to treat government documents as a kind of research library from which to extract knowledge about how the government is operating.

Ironically British journalists have been able to find out about the poor safety record of British Leyland Allegro cars by gaining access to documents filed by the United States government which would be unobtainable in London.

The object of a Freedom of Information Bill is not simply to help journalists in their investigations. Its fundamental premise is that in a developed democracy people need maximum access to the information available to government when it makes decisions in our name. A full access to the facts is the only way the public, including MPs and trade unions, can decide whether or not the government is taking the wisest decision.

Freedom of information should extend beyond the government. Similar measures should be extended to public corporations and local authorities. The BBC Board of Governors and management and the Independent Broadcasting Authority should be obliged to publish their minutes. At the personal level every individual should have statutory access to any file kept on him or herself and should be informed if personal details are made available, by computer record transfer, from one body to another.

Private companies need to be made to provide more information about their true owners and beneficiaries, and any request for public support – planning permissions, government grants, tax reliefs – should be made public.

Apart from a major statutory increase in the public's right to know and a major decrease in the government's policy of official secrecy the laws governing libel and contempt of court need overhauling.

Libel law is a racket used by the rich to preserve their often dubious reputations. When Granada Television and the *Sunday Mirror* carried out investigations into the late Reginald Maudling's financial affairs he responded by issuing writs for libel. But although writs were issued the case never came to court. Maudling, in effect, used the libel procedures to stop further investigation. By leaving the writs lying on the table he not only stopped further publication or broadcasts by the *Sunday Mirror* or Granada, he also gave notice to other journalists that he would involve them in costly legal processes if they dared publish material exposing his business affairs.

Such use of the 'gagging' writ is one abuse of libel law. Another problem is that legal aid is not available for libel action which means only the wealthy can afford the expense of solicitors and barristers.

Libel cases such as the one in which the television actor, Telly Savalas, collected £34,000 from the *Daily Mail* attract great publicity but the vast majority of libel cases never come to court; they are settled behind the scenes as the lottery of libel actions in court is too risky even for plaintiffs with a good case. Newspapers, broadcasting organisations and publishers employ lawyers to scan work before it is published to remove potentially defamatory material. They inevitably err on the side of caution and much important material is never published on legal advice.

The laws on libel need substantial revision. One lawyer, Geoffrey Robertson, has suggested that they could be replaced by a tribunal with power to order the press to publish appropriate retractions of errors of fact, and to order compensation when actual damage has been proven.

Another abuse of the legal system is that which prevents newspapers reporting stories where there is a possibility of court proceedings being prejudiced. Clearly this is necessary when a jury sits but many cases

are heard by judges alone and they are, in accepted legal theory, beyond influence by mere newspaper articles. This allows comment on a case even when notice of appeal is given. It should also be extended downwards into cases where judges alone sit.

This would remove the ability of the government to prosecute newspapers like the *Sunday Times* for trying to publish details of the Thalidomide tragedy on the grounds that it might affect the deliberations of judges considering appeals over compensation.

The law as presently enshrined and operated is a major barrier to the public's right to know and the journalist's ability to function openly and honestly. This is not a new observation. Various royal or government commissions have suggested reforms.

In 1974 the Labour government was elected pledged to bring in various reforms. It reneged on those promises. Next time round (and in the interim private members' bills on official secrecy and freedom of information deserve the maximum encouragement) the new Labour cabinet must be tied hand, foot, heart and head to reforms in this area and the promises must be kept.

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