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Review

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Has the media ever been as rotten as it is now? Of course, the media is part of society and defends the current system. But within limits, there has been room for probing, investigative journalism. Today's news stories, however, are dominated by repetitious, unchecked stories usually in the cynical service of political spin and naked profit. Peter Taaffe reviews a devastating book which lifts the lid on the workings of the media.

There already exists in Britain a fairly widespread suspicion, if not a clear conviction, that the capitalist media – television, press, radio and, increasingly, websites allied to these information outlets – are biased and lack veracity.

The 'red tops', the tabloid press, are the greatest sinners, with Rupert Murdoch's Sun in the vanguard. Its journalists generally adhere to the maxim: 'Make it short, make it snappy and make it up'.

Yet, if Nick Davies's book was circulated in millions of copies – as it deserves to be – with sections of it presented in a popular fashion, this suspicion of the media would be translated into outright scorn and revulsion. For this reason, and the fact that it challenges every facet of the so-called 'free press', it will probably be briefly reviewed, commented on and forgotten, maybe becoming a kind of samizdat (underground journal) for media aficionados, journalists, etc. Some outraged reviewers have already attacked 'Saint Nick' for his book. Yet his revelations – which are sensational in their detail – should serve as a starting point for a widespread debate on how to eliminate the colossal undemocratic power wielded by this so-called 'fourth estate' in setting the agenda of society.

Davies calls his book Flat Earth News as a metaphor of the recycling by the press of unproven stories such as the 'millennium bug'. This failed to materialise and yet the government spent between £396 million and £788 million to combat its expected effects!

Right at the beginning, he states that his investigation led to the conclusion that "almost all journalists across the whole developed world now work within a kind of professional cage, which distorts their work and crushes their spirit. I'm talking about the fact that finally I was forced to admit that I work in a corrupted profession".

And why is this so? Nick Davies does not provide the obvious answer which flows from his analysis; that it is because of the ruthless control operated by a handful of billionaires to determine what we read, see and hear. This can be easily deduced from the detail he provides

of the ownership of this powerful medium: "The American media critic Ben Bagdikian has traced the corporate takeover. In 1997, he wrote about the corporations producing America's newspapers, magazines, radio, television, books and films: 'With each passing year... the number of controlling firms in all these media has shrunk: from 50 corporations in 1984 to 26 in 1987, followed by 23 in 1990, and then, as the borders between the different media began to blur, to less than 20 in 1993. In 1996 [it] is closer to ten'. By 2004, he found the US media was dominated by just five companies: Time Warner, Disney, Murdoch's News Corporation, Bertelsmann of Germany and Viacom".

Conversely, the number of people employed in the industry fell by 18% between 1990 and 2004. In one twelve-month period in 2004-05, some 450 journalists were pushed out of their jobs in the New York Times, San Francisco Chronicle, etc. At the same time, the average operating profit margin of these media corporations was 20.5%, approximately twice as high as the level among Fortune 500 companies. The situation in Britain is no better, with the domination of the likes of Murdoch: "The more I looked, the more I found falsehood, distortion and propaganda running through the outlets of an industry which is supposed to be dedicated to the very opposite, ie to telling the truth".

He points to the hypocrisy of the Fleet Street hierarchy: "Executives whose papers support the war against drugs are shoving cocaine up their nostrils in the office toilets; reporters who attack the sexual adventures of others while routinely dropping their own trousers at the first scent of a willing secretary". These are the kind of people – Murdoch's Sun and News of the World – who pursued Tommy Sheridan over allegations about his personal life, then, when they were defeated, systematically conducted a vendetta against him. This was an attempt to legally destroy a symbol of one of the most successful mass struggles in British labour movement history, the mass anti-poll tax battle.

Churnalism

A substantial part of the book deals with the plight of journalists who, through relentless pressure, have been reduced to 'churnalists', merely passing on unchecked stories from outlets such as the Press Association (PA), Reuters and Associated Press (AP). Davies recognises that there was no golden age when journalists were free to honestly report on events, present both sides of an argument, and reflect 'the truth'. But a certain latitude did exist in the past, which allowed some, particularly well-known figures, many of a left persuasion, to find a platform for airing views which questioned, if not the system of capitalism, the consequences that flowed from it.

Now, as with other professions, the remorseless pressure of neo-liberalism has reduced journalists to mere cogs who churn out information force-fed to them. There is an additional factor not recognised by Davies. In the past, the pressure of a powerful trade union movement allied to widespread support for socialist ideas compelled the capitalist press to reflect this in their coverage. They were compelled to give a platform to leading left Labour and trade union figures, including strike leaders and even the occasional Marxist. Some newspapers like the Daily Mirror tilted to the left, towards Labour, when it was at bottom a workers' party. This, in turn, gave a space for radical journalism. All this was squashed by the advent of 'Murdochism' and the brutal capitalist methods he personified.

And this does not apply just to the tabloids. In a Cardiff University investigation, commissioned by Davies, of the so-called 'quality press' – The Times, The Guardian, The Independent and the Daily Telegraph – 60% of "quality-print stories consisted wholly or mainly of wire copy and/or PR material". Only 12% of stories, the researchers said, were generated by the reporters themselves. Sixty-nine per cent of news stories in The Times were mainly wire-copied (from the PA and other agencies) or public relations (PR). Seventy per cent of the stories which claimed to be fact passed into print without any corroboration. The researchers concluded: "These data portray a picture of journalism in which any meaningful independent journalistic activity by the press is the exception rather than the rule". Some journalists do check their stories but the past 'everyday practices' of journalism are "now the exception rather than the rule".

PR has grown astronomically since the 1980s, by companies and political parties. There are now 48,000 PR representatives compared to 45,000 journalists in Britain. PR today, as Davies shows, is part of the web of dirty tricks, the judicious selection of 'truths' and issues, and "the skilful manipulation of reporters to persuade them to focus only on chosen angles". Allied to this are 'pseudo-groups' who pump

apparently independent stories into the media, masquerading as grassroots organisations – known by cynical PR advisers as 'Astroturf' because their grassroots are not real! Typical of this mass of groups is Cancer United, used to push anti-cancer drugs, and Americans for Constitutional Freedom (sections of the porn 'industry').

There is also the appearance of an array of think tanks, the 'intellectual' monasteries of the modern era, which are funded by big business and whose spokespersons award themselves pseudo-titles such as 'senior fellow' or 'research director'. One such individual popped up in Fleet Street as a multi-talented 'expert' – head of research at the Economic Research Council, director of the Efficiency in Government Unit, author of The Official Guide to British Quangos, author of a Centre for Policy Studies report, and the environment director of the Stockholm Network.

New Labour manipulation

Of course, frontline in the rogues' gallery of the PR 'industry' are those in the employ of capitalist parties and leading politicians. New Labour front men like Peter Mandelson – who was the initiator of his party's skills in the 'dark arts' of manipulation – and Alistair Campbell have occupied first place as arrogant, seemingly untouchable exponents of PR. The essence of PR was summed up by William Clark, press adviser to Anthony Eden at the time of the Suez crisis: "Public opinion could not be ignored. It had to be fooled. The power of government to deceive is so immense that fooling all of the people some of the time can successfully and easily lead to fooling them all of the time". Since this was written, PR has expanded enormously and succeeds in bending the truth on a vast scale.

With the help of PR and the kept press, Campbell, on behalf of the Blair government, used every dirty method in order to suppress the colossal criticism which had built up over the war in Iraq. The monstrous lie over Saddam's weapons of mass destructions used to justify the war is a tale often told. However, Davies gives even more graphic detail about this, the attack on the journalist Andrew Gilligan over the 'sexed-up' intelligence report justifying the war, and many other examples of New Labour's responsibility for the war. Davies shows clearly that Campbell's attack on Gilligan was a decoy to deflect attention away from Blair. Campbell waited four weeks after Gilligan's Radio 4 Today programme story before he pounced. Davies says that the infamous storming of Channel 4 by Campbell – when he attacked the BBC for daring to challenge the truthfulness of Blair over the war – was "so aggressive that political columnists started to wonder out loud

whether the prime minister's press secretary might be cracking up under the strain". However, Campbell was successful in diverting attention from the original question about Iraq's weapons of mass destruction, which was now "shunted into the sidings".

His bullying, even of capitalist journalists, was taken to unheard of lengths by his New Labour acolytes. Davies reports that ministers in the government approached some newspapers with "explicit invitations to sack Andy McSmith, the political editor of the Independent, Paul Eastham, the political editor of the Daily Mail, Christian Wolmar, the transport editor of the Independent... and Andrew Marr, when he was editor of the Independent". Unbelievably this list included Mark Mardell – an inveterate anti-left figure – who was then a political correspondent for Newsnight. Even the Financial Times was not, it seems, free from New Labour control freaks like Mandelson. After a story which irritated him, he called the girlfriend of the offending FT journalist, Ivo Dawnay, "late on the night of its publication with a simple message: 'Just tell Ivo he's dead'."

The advent of new technology, of websites which are now run by major media organisations, have reinforced the tendency towards 'churnalism'. Studies found that "34% of what they published in 2001 was simply reproduced from the two big agencies [Reuters and AP] and their smaller competitor, Agence France-Presse". The same goes for 'Google News' which "does not even pretend to be checking its stories or exercise any kind of journalistic judgement".

Avoid the electric fence

Another huge barrier to honest journalism is what Davies calls the "rules of production". Some commentators trace the collapse of investigative journalism from its peak of the Watergate scandal in the mid-1970s. Now, 'I-teams' on American television "steer clear of tough subjects involving government or the abuse of power". Instead, local television news often employs its I-teams in such challenging stories as "... 'dangerous doors', reporting on the hazards of opening and closing doors; or 'inside your washing machine'." The same approach infiltrates current affairs television in Britain. One experienced commentator told Davies: "We've done 'F*** me, I'm fat'. We've done 'F*** me, I'm thin'. We're just working on 'F*** me, I'm f***ed up'".

One of the most important journalistic rules is, it seems, 'avoid the electric fence', which means play it safe, do not offend the powers that be. The most important 'fence' is media law, particularly the Official Secrets Acts and libel. The latter's protection, as Davies points out, applies only to the rich and powerful

because it costs a lot of money to sue, and legal aid has never been available for libel actions. It is therefore common for newspaper lawyers confronted with a potentially libellous story to ask the reporter: 'Does this chap have money?' If you have, like the late Robert Maxwell, no matter how big a crook you are, you can effectively repel any reporting of your crimes for fear of a costly libel action. But if like Tommy Sheridan and other leading left figures you do not have shedloads of cash to defend yourself then any calumny can be deployed against you. This is the background against which journalists are expected to fulfil their mission in reporting objective facts, investigating their truthfulness or otherwise, as well as being creative. Given the conditions in which they operate, this is an impossible task today.

The author gives a devastating picture of how even former outposts of objectivity, such as the Sunday Times's highly-regarded Insight team was smashed up when Murdoch took over. Its pioneering role was systematically undermined, first of all becoming the 'Hindsight' team and eventually being wound up. The case of the Observer newspaper is, if anything, even more damning. Here is a liberal journal that stood out against the invasion of Egypt at the time of the Suez crisis of 1956, but was recruited by Blair and Campbell, via the paper's pliable editor Roger Alton, to support the obscene Iraq war.

In fact, the intensification in the workplace, allied to the savage reduction in the number of journalists, means the media, in the main, has overwhelmingly become a money-making machine in the service of the status quo. One graduate journalist, within a few months of starting on a regional paper, sent an email back to her university tutor: "I feel like I am turning out a load of shit... I'm starting to dislike the job... It is a sweatshop". Davies comments: "Journalism without checking is like a human body without an immune system... But... that essential immune system has started to collapse. In a strange, alarming and generally unnoticed development, journalists are pounding out stories without checking them – stories which then circle the planet". But how else can journalists act if, like some, they are expected to write ten stories every shift?

The concentration of media ownership has now produced a situation whereby ten corporations own 74% of the private media. This monopolisation meant that 8,000 journalists working outside of London lost their jobs between 1986 and 2000. This is a blow not just against journalists as such but also news gathering in general. The same process has continued systematically at the BBC and other television and radio outlets. At the same time, there is a mania with speed which undermines accuracy. One news chief reported on a test that timed readers' access to different news sites. He told his staff: "Our site came on top with a

load time of 0.85 seconds to beat the likes of ITV and Sky (1.63 secs)". Davies comments: "That's a saving of 0.78 seconds he's cheering there". All of this, he comments, results in a recycling of 'ignorance'.

It is difficult to fault Nick Davies's forensic analysis of a sick media. But what conclusions does he draw? He correctly identifies the crushing of the print unions in the Wapping dispute as a turning point, not just for print workers but for journalists as well. He says that Murdoch's establishment of his new 'fortress' at Wapping in 1986, "broke the print unions and removed the final obstacle to the rule of the corporations 'who thought greatly about commerce and casually about journalism'." But then, reflecting popular prejudice, he makes the unwarranted statement: "Those unions were notorious for their greed and bad practices".

There was nothing 'greedy' about the print workers. Through the force of their unions and many hard-fought battles in the past they had extracted from ruthless bosses favourable wages and conditions. They had established norms which other workers dreamed of and, moreover, hoped to attain in the future. But the defeat of the print workers, together with the miners, discouraged millions of workers and, to some extent, still does today. Despite his misleading comments on the print unions, Davies admits: "But they [the print unions] were also the only force strong enough to resist the new corporate owners. And without them, the journalists' union, which had always relied on the printers to stop the paper coming out when they were in dispute, lost its power too. Now, the grocers could rein in all the warhorses".

This points up the crucial role of the working class as the leading force in industrial and social struggles, not just in the print unions or other industries but in general. It graphically underlines the dependency of other intermediary layers – although they might appear more 'educated' and 'culturally' advanced – and the majority of the middle class on the struggles of the workers. Moreover, historical experience has shown that journalists can be drawn into the whirlpool of social upheaval and move to the left, sometimes in a decisive fashion. Witness the radicalising effect on journalists of the Russian revolution – with John Reed as one striking example – or the Spanish, Chinese and Portuguese revolutions. Upheavals in Britain, which loom, can exercise a similar effect on British journalists, especially as many are now subjected to the same neo-liberal, brutal sweatshop conditions as workers in general.

Political power

The one weakness in this book is that despite the battle at Wapping and what flowed from it, and all the evidence that Davies himself provides, he is reluctant

to draw the conclusion that the media is in the service of 'political power', particularly that which defends the already existing capitalist system. He freely admits that the press barons of the past were "in love with political power" and the demands of the system. Lord Northcliffe used his newspapers to topple the Asquith government in May 1915 and "create another (led by Lloyd George in December 1916)". His brother, Lord Rothermere, infamously through the Daily Mail, cheered on the fascists in Germany and Britain in the 1930s. Lord Beaverbrook bluntly stated that, as owner of the Daily Express, "I run the paper for the purpose of making propaganda and with no other motive".

Davies tries to argue, unsuccessfully, that the new corporate owners interfere far less than their propagandist predecessors. Proof of this, he says, is that most journalists "nowadays will tell you they have never written a story on the instructions, direct or indirect, of an owner or of any editorial placemen employed by an owner". He misses the point that such 'instructions', open censorship, are generally not necessary because most journalists have a censor sitting on their shoulders. They know very well by the tone that is set, by the prevailing views within a particular newspaper and society as a whole, what is 'permissible' and what is not.

Davies honestly points out that Tiny Rowland, an infamous financial mogul, "repeatedly meddled in the inner workings of the Observer to win political favours in Africa, where his company, Lonrho, had vast business interests. Robert Maxwell did the same". Conrad Black, now relaxing in prison, attacked the leader comments in the Daily Telegraph when he was its owner. Its editor at the time, Max Hastings, confessed: "I've never really believed in the notion of editorial independence... I would never imagine saying to Conrad, 'You have no right to ask me to do this', because Conrad is... richly entitled to take a view when he owns the newspaper". Andrew Neil, right-wing lickspittle of Murdoch and Thatcher, when he took over the Sunday Times from Harry Evans, described Murdoch as "an interventionist proprietor who expected to get his way... Why should the owner not be the ultimate arbiter of what was in his paper?" Davies argues that today mainly commercial considerations have taken over in the production and slant of newspapers. Undoubtedly, everything, including news and information, is today globalised; neo-liberal capitalism reduces everything to the 'cash nexus', as Carlyle said. Murdoch and Rothermere will stoop to every base method in order to increase their circulations and their viewers, in order to boost their profits.

Snapshot of a cancer

But the most crucial question raised by this tremen-

dous book is the one posed at the end by Davies himself: 'what is to be done?' He shows that the Press Complaints Commission (PCC) is a toothless body incapable and unwilling to take on the press moguls in the declared interests of truth and objectivity. It rejects 90% of all complaints on 'technical grounds' without investigating them. But his weakness is a harking back to an imaginary time when journalists wrote not to the agenda of the owners of the press but to the honest principles of journalism. It is true that there were some, such as The Times pre-Murdoch, which were journals of record, reporting events objectively, in the main to forearm the class it represented, the capitalists.

It is a revelation to consult copies of British newspapers – not just The Times but also The Guardian – from the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s, and compare them to their contents today. Then, journalists gave fairly objective reports; for instance, of the Spanish civil war, sit-down strikes in France in 1936, etc. The editorials were different, reflecting the class standpoint of the editors and owners. But the journalists did report what had taken place. Today, bigger and bigger papers are short on real facts but large on opinion, usually of the most superficial, shallow and, of course, pro-capitalist kind.

Leon Trotsky once declared that The Times told the truth nine times out of ten, the better to lie on that crucial tenth occasion when its vital class interests were at stake. This was demonstrated in The Times's stance in the 1926 general strike, as it was with the BBC, which became propaganda arms of the government against the working class. In every major social confrontation since that has been the case. The difference today is that Murdoch's The Times, with the rest of the press, only rarely allows the truth to be reported. The result is numbing uniformity in the coverage of news. To read The Independent, The Guardian and even the Financial Times (outside of its specific economic and financial content) on the same day is often to be confronted with almost identical reports, with the same phrases. It is obvious – particularly after the revelations in this book – that this is because the 'news' is taken from the same (unchecked) source.

Therefore, while Davies is penetrating in his diagnosis of the disease – the degeneration of the press and the media in Britain and worldwide – his solutions are an idealisation of that sector he represents, journalists, who occupy a position between the big boss proprietor, capitalist governments and the working class. This middle position is untenable, particularly in periods of high social tension, as has been demonstrated in the past. This does not mean to say that there are not courageous journalists and commentators today who do their best to inform us of the truth, to seek to champion the oppressed, downtrodden and working

class. But theirs is a muted voice compared to the past, with attempts to push them to the margin, as with the courageous likes of John Pilger, Robert Fisk, etc.

Davies places his hope in ameliorating this 'cancer' in alternative sources of news, which have been set up particularly on the internet. There is no doubt that the internet has been partially successful in countering the capitalist media's distortions and lies. But, as we have seen, the Murdochs and the rest, ever adaptable, are trying to colonise even this medium. Davies praises Ignacio Ramonet, editor-in-chief of Le Monde Diplomatique, who stated: "We intend to stay faithful to the fundamental principles of our way of making the news... presenting news and information not often published and, indeed, often concealed; and daring to go against the tide of the dominant media". This is commendable. But Davies pessimistically adds: "In the real world, however, it is unlikely we will find any way of bringing the media back on track". This begs the question whether it was ever 'on track'. To paraphrase Karl Marx, the ruling ideas of any epoch are ultimately those of the ruling class. This is the real role of the media in capitalist society.

On the last page of his book, Davies declares: "I am afraid that I think the truth is that, in trying to expose the weakness of the media, I am taking a snapshot of a cancer. Maybe it helps a little to be able to see the illness. At least that way we know in theory what the cure might be. But I fear the illness is terminal". Yes, the illness of the capitalist media is terminal. But the solution ultimately is to create a real alternative. This means creating alternative, democratically controlled sources of information, particularly about the struggles of the oppressed, the activities of the working class, the labour movement and the trade unions. This means independent papers, hopefully in time radio stations, and demands for access to TV.

The workers' voice

Davies says that one of the greatest sins of the media today is 'omission'. He gives some examples of this but does not mention the complete absence of any comment in the media on the trade unions. Corporations and big business, the inner workings of the boardrooms, are commented on but there is no discussion of what is taking place in the workplace – the boiling anger of the working class, the deterioration in their conditions, etc. This task will not be fulfilled by the present media. All strength to those conscientious journalists who seek, through the cracks that exist, to find a road to the truth and objectivity. But it will be by building up a powerful workers' and socialist press that the real alternative to the 'cancer-ridden' media of Britain and the world will be created.

This must be accompanied by raising now the need for the nationalisation of the printing presses, television and radio, under popular management and control, as the most democratic means of overcoming the dictatorial stranglehold presently exercised by the press moguls and their acolytes. This is not to suggest 'state control' of the press. We, the working class and the labour movement, do not want to take over the Sun, the Daily Mail or even the august Guardian. We oppose the state monopoly of news and information as existed in the Stalinist states of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. We were even opposed during the 1974-75 Portuguese revolution to the undemocratic takeover by Communist Party militants and others of the journal República, which leaned towards the Socialist Party. This action allowed the right to mobilise – behind the Socialist Party of Mario Soares – not just against this measure, which was pictured as dictatorial, but against the revolution itself. Similarly, we opposed the recent actions of Hugo Chávez against the right-wing television station RCTV, which was used as a handle by the right to picture his government as taking a step towards dictatorship. This was a factor in the defeat of Chávez in last December's referendum.

The real alternative is democratic working-class and popular control of the press and media in general. This would not result in a monopoly for the government or one party but allow access to the media in proportion to political support. Trotsky wrote 70 years ago, in relation to Mexico where the issue of press freedom and nationalisation was being discussed: "The real tasks of the workers' state do not consist in policing public opinion, but in freeing it from the yoke of capital. This can only be done by placing the means of production – which includes the production of information – in the hands of society in its entirety. Once this essential step towards socialism has been taken, all currents of opinion which have not taken up arms against... the proletariat must be able to express themselves freely. It is the duty of the workers' state to put in their hands, to all according to their numeric importance, the technical means necessary for this, printing presses, paper, means of transportation".

Capitalism and Stalinism defend undemocratic control of the media by a minority. Scientific socialism, Marxism, socialism and democracy stand for taking the 'production of information' out of the hands of a minority to put it in the hands of a majority and allow full freedom of discussion. If Nick Davies's book is used to further this, it will have fulfilled a great progressive mission. He has, in any case, provided the political ammunition for such a campaign embracing journalists, the working class and the labour movement as a whole.

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