

Today's media play a key role in industrial disputes and trade unionists should support efforts to maintain and develop a democratic and accountable media, says Granville Williams

THE media can play a powerful role in mobilising support for or against industrial disputes, even for or against going to war. So the answer to the question 'Do you trust the media to tell the truth and give you unbiased information?' is not just of academic interest.

Clearly, the answer, based on MORI polls year after year is no, people do not trust the media. Journalists are down there with the lowest of the low, amongst pariah groups such as politicians and estate agents.

But a survey about a year ago of more than 2,000 people, Trusted Professions...and others, produced a surprising set of results to the question, 'How much do you trust the following to tell the truth?' Top of the poll (85%) were journalists for ITV News, BBC News and Channel 4 News, followed by head teachers, people who run charities and judges. Journalists on broadsheet papers like The Guardian and local papers polled 65% and 60% respectively. It was journalists on the red-top tabloids such as The Sun and Mirror who came in at the bottom (14%). No change there, then.

But there are problems with the notion of truth when it comes to reporting industrial actions like the Fire Service dispute of 2002-2003, or the epic industrial struggle of the Miners in 1984-85. Sections of the right-wing press were hostile from the outset to both disputes. The anti-union stance of Rupert Murdoch's papers, The Sun, News of the World, The Times and The Sunday Times, which have nearly 40% of national



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Will they get it right? Journalists are increasingly mistrusted

News you can trust?

newspaper circulation, is well known.

It was also reinforced by the Daily Mail and Mail on Sunday, and the traditional voices of Tory England, The Daily and Sunday Telegraph. Even the Financial Times had an editorial (November 12, 2002) which urged the Government to give the Firefighters an ultimatum: 'accept new terms or think about alternative careers'. It concluded, 'The possibility of dismissal helps concentrate minds wonderfully'.

After the first strike in November 2002 public support for the Firefighters was clear, in spite of hostile press coverage and matched by disapproval of the way the Government had mishandled the dispute. As a result we saw a major and aggressive spin offensive by the Labour Government to undermine public support, one which the right wing press were willing accomplices in promoting.

The Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom (CPBF) was founded in the aftermath of another assault by the

media on trades unions in the winter of 1978-79 and since then we have sought to promote policies to develop a diverse, democratic and accountable media. We still have a long way to go to achieve these policies, but they are ones that trades unionists should support, especially in the current climate.

We believe that concentrated media power often weakens or undermines democracy. If newspapers print partial truths, downright lies or promote prejudice this does damage to the democratic process.

More worryingly, politicians seem to want to curry favour from powerful media moguls. In 1995 it was Tony Blair who flew to Australia to address Rupert Murdoch's executives and suggested Labour would support policies to boost his media ownership in the UK. Since then Labour has been careful not to antagonise Murdoch and lose the support of

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MEDIA

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papers like The Sun in the 1997 and 2001 elections. In turn all of Rupert Murdoch's newspapers worldwide supported the policies pursued by George Bush and Tony Blair in the war on Iraq.

In March 2004 it was the turn of Tory leader, Michael Howard, to address the assembled News Corp executives in Cancun, Mexico.

In marked contrast to our distrust of sections of the press, over the years we have trusted television (well, most of the time) as a source of impartial news. But there are problems looming here too. Rupert Murdoch has long believed that the notion of impartial news should be thrown out. In the USA Fox News is an example of the sort of TV news he prefers. Any pretence of balance is spurious. The news programme was the cheerleader for the war on Iraq and unapologetically continues to support the Bush administration.

Our broadcasting media is in the throes

For more information on the CPBF visit its website: www.cpbp.org.uk or contact the campaign at: CPBF
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of deregulation, with light touch guidelines replacing clear programming requirements. Media ownership rules have been loosened so that we now have a single ITV and even the prospect of a merged C4 and Channel 5. There is also the threat that the BBC, the flagship public service broadcaster may have its licence fee cut or even abolished, and replaced by subscription.

The Hutton report slated the BBC for sloppy reporting. The report itself was deeply flawed and unbalanced, but it has given support to those critics of the BBC who want to weaken or abolish it. It is amazing how sections of the press have

attacked the BBC for sloppy reporting yet the reporting standards of the very papers criticising the BBC are consistently far lower.

Between now and 2006 the BBC Charter is up for renewal. The monster regulatory body OFCOM is conducting a major review of public service broadcasting, and the Department of Culture, Media and Sport is also under a major consultation exercise. If you care about the future of broadcasting, and receiving news and information you can trust, it is vital to let your views be known. The CPBF is mounting a major campaign to defend public service broadcasting and the BBC. The alternative, broadcasting dominated by commercialism and billionaire media owners, is not an attractive one. We have to make sure it does not happen.

Granville Williams edits the Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom journal Free Press

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Suggests the call for referendums on the EU constitution and the euro — and is anti against both

The Morning Star also provides, for just 10p a day, unrivalled daily coverage of the trade union movement, political and general news and comment, together with a richly varied leisure page: provocative feature articles and lively reporting of sport, music, arts, drama and books.

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AN ALTERNATIVE VOICE

John Haylett and Mick Rix put the case for the one daily newspaper that backed Firefighters and Control Staff all the way

FIRE Brigades Union members came up against the reality of Britain's "free press" when they began to take action in support of their entirely reasonable claim to a professional salary of £30,000.

Suddenly, the standard portrayal of Firefighters doing their duty in burning buildings, rail disasters and terrorist incidents as heroes went out the window.

In a moment, they were transformed into greedy, lazy defenders of a regime dedicated to providing them with a cushy number at the expense of the downtrodden taxpayer.

New Labour Ministers made the bullets for the anti-FBU media to fire and, in turn, quoted the snide attacks on Firefighters as the views of the people.

One Scottish Executive Minister went so far in repeating the Cabinet-inspired lying propaganda that FBU members were opposed to women and Black people joining the Service that he called union activists 'fascist bastards'.

Only one daily newspaper stuck with the FBU membership throughout its epic dispute: the Morning Star.

Not because the Morning Star sees the FBU as a special case: the paper has stood in solidarity with the miners, seafarers, printers, railworkers, teachers, civil servants and every other section of the

working class that has been driven to defend itself against ruthless employers, both private and public but because that is the reason for the paper's existence.

Despite its meagre resources, our paper punches above its weight in the ongoing struggle of working people against the rich and powerful.

The Morning Star opposes the New Labour pro-business project while recognising that allowing the return to Government of Michael Howard's Tories would make the task of seeking justice for trade unionists, pensioners and students even harder.

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It could do even more if its circulation was higher and its financial foundations more secure.

The Morning Star does not profit from the big-business advertising revenue that the rest of the media depends on. It relies exclusively on its circulation income and backing from the labour movement.

If every FBU organisation was to order a daily copy and also to buy shares in the People's Press Printing Society (PPPS) – the readers' co-operative that publishes the Morning Star – the future would be brighter not only for the Morning Star but also for workers' solidarity.

For further information, contact us at the address below or the new Morning Star website at www.morningstaronline.co.uk

John Haylett is editor of the Morning Star
Mick Rix is chairman of PPPS

How Murdoch could take over BBC TV channels

THE 2003 Communications Act enshrines a more competitive and deregulatory spirit into the media environment where the aim is, above all, to create a dynamic and competitive media industry.

The most controversial point of the legislation is the clause that allows terrestrial broadcasting companies – BBC1, BBC2, ITV, Channel 4 and Channel 5 – to be bought by dominant newspaper groups or non-EU companies for the first time. This could lead to the possibility of Rupert Murdoch extending his grip over the British media.

Furthermore, regulation is now firmly "only in the last instance", subject to general competition legislation and policed by a new "light-touch" regulator of both media and telecommunications, OFCOM.

What is the make-up of OFCOM, this new "light as a feather", independent regulator? Consider the profiles of its two main officials.

Stephen Carter, chief executive, is the former managing director of the highly unsuccessful and debt-ridden cable company NTL. In a speech in January 2004, he summed up OFCOM's approach: "We are, fundamentally free-market and light-touch, tempered by a bit of social justice" (www.ofcom.org.uk).

Chairman David Currie was a Labour Peer, Party donor, former adviser to Blair and Dean of the Business School of City University. His previous experience of regulation was that he was on the board of the energy regulator OFGEM.

They are certainly well qualified as businesspeople and well connected to Number Ten. But their conception of media that it

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