

JANUARY 04

Media sense and sensibilities

At a pair of British daily newspapers — the Independent and the Guardian — plus the Observer on Sunday, journalists are far more willing than their U.S. counterparts to repeatedly take on powerful interests. Tough questions get pursued at length and in depth. News coverage is often factually devastating. And commentaries don't mince words.

A recent essay in the Independent contended that Prime Minister Tony Blair "has, in short, proved himself a scoundrel and a hypocrite again and again and again." The column, by Matthew Norman, continued: "How he has survived at all is something for tomorrow's political historians to explain, but one thing is clear: without a press that has erred, if anything, towards over-indulging him, he'd have got clean away with the lot of it."

In other words, overall, media outlets in Britain haven't challenged Blair enough — but if they'd challenged him less, then the situation would be even worse and Blair would have a freer hand. There's a lot of alarmed commentary about the ostensibly left-leaning Blair government's drift into authoritarian rule. Under such circumstances, in any country (nowhere more than in the USA), vigorous journalism is essential to prevent further erosion of civil liberties and other fundamental rights.

"Only a deranged fantasist overdosing on mescaline, then, could see Her Majesty's press as a paradigm of moral cleanliness," Independent columnist Norman wrote. "So scorn and loathe it if you choose. But do so in the knowledge that, at this oddly dangerous point in our democratic history, it is the only effective barrier between a roguish, ruthless British government and the creation of a country in which very few of us would care to live."

An observer of media on both sides of the Atlantic would not be surprised by conclusions from the research outfit Media Tenor International, which found that "the media coverage of the war in Iraq and the consequences of military action was much different in tone in European media from the coverage in U.S. newspapers or TV news broadcasts." For British journalists, that has meant often countering not only the White

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House line but also the pronouncements of their own government.

The media picture is hardly monochromatic. Blair's war policies have received appreciable help as well as disapproval from the British press. But there's an extent of diversity and feistiness in the UK that's rare in mainstream American media.

Meanwhile, it's evident that corporate power is casting a very large shadow over Britain. Even daily papers on the left appear to be enmeshed with some big financial interests. And an evening of prime-time TV channel-surfing brings a steady flood of commercial messages.

Likewise, some of London's most storied religious institutions now welcome commercialism. Last month, at a free concert inside St. Paul's Cathedral, the musicians and acoustics were superb; on the cover of the official program, the biggest lettering — much larger than "St. Paul's Cathedral" and "A Celebration of Christmas" — was reserved for "Lloyds TSB," the bank sponsoring the event.

At the same time, economic disparities are extreme in the midst of plenty. The Independent recently filled its tabloid-size front page with an expose that began: "Nearly three-quarters of Britain's poorest children are concentrated in just four cities, trapped in urban ghettos of acute deprivation that have seen little or no improvement for a generation."

Across the English Channel, the daily France Soir had this headline dominating its front page: "Les Inegalites Explosent en France." The edition included several stories, accompanied by graphs, showing that the French government has understated the widening gap between rich and poor.

Wherever we might go, many of the forces buffeting people's lives are similar. Golden arches have a presence on Parisian streets. With French children in the lead, families are consuming the cuisine of the noted chef Ronald McDonald. Painted on the outside of the restaurants was a very loose translation of the fast-food chain's "I'm lovin' it" slogan — "C'est tout ce que j'aime." It's everything that I like.