

Media censorship high on the agenda

Reducing journalism to a branch of corporate and government public relations is the hidden agenda of the media deregulators, in Britain and America.

The Australian novelist Richard Flanagan was recently asked by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation to read a favourite piece of fiction on national radio and explain his reasons for the choice.

“I was unsure what fiction to read to you this morning,” he said. “If we take the work of our most successful spinner of fictions in recent times, [Prime Minister] John Howard, I could have read from the varied and splendid tall tales he and his fellow storytellers have concocted...” He listed Howard’s most famous fictions: that desperate refugees trying to reach Australia had wilfully thrown their children overboard, and that faraway Australia was endangered by Iraq’s “weapons of hysterical distraction”, as he put it.

He followed this with Molly Bloom’s soliloquy from Joyce’s *Ulysses*, “because in our time of lies and hate it seems appropriate to be reminded of the beauty of saying yes to the chaos of truth...” This was duly recorded; but when the programme was broadcast, the entire preface about Howard was missing. Flanagan accused the ABC of rank censorship. No, was the response; they just didn’t want “anything political”. This was followed, he wrote, by “a moment of high comedy: would I, the producer asked, be interested in coming on a programme to discuss disillusionment in contemporary Australia?”

In a society that once prided itself on its laconic sense of irony, there was not a hint of it, just a managerial silence. “All around me,” Flanagan later wrote, “I see avenues for expression closing, an odd collusion of an ever-more cowed media and the way in which the powerful seek to dictate what is and what isn’t read and heard.”

He may well be speaking for the rest of us. The censorship in Australia that he

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describes is especially virulent because Australia is a small media pond inhabited by large sharks: a microcosm of what the British might expect if the current assault on free journalism is not challenged. The leader of this assault is, of course, Rupert Murdoch, whose dominance in the land of his birth is now symptomatic of his worldwide grip. Of 12 daily newspapers in the capital cities, Murdoch controls seven. Of the ten Sunday newspapers, Murdoch has seven. In Adelaide, he has a complete monopoly. He owns everything, including all the printing presses. It is almost impossible to escape his augmented team of Pravdas.

Like all his newspapers, they follow the path paved with his “interests” and his extremism. They echo Murdoch’s description of Bush and Blair as “heroes” of the Iraq invasion, and his dismissal of the blood they spilt. For good measure, his tabloid the Herald Sun invented an al-Qaeda terrorist training camp near Melbourne; and all his papers promote John Howard’s parrot-like obsequiousness to Bush, just as they laud Howard’s racist campaign against a few thousand asylum-seekers who are locked away in outback concentration camps.

Murdochism, disguised or not, is standard throughout the media he does not control. The Melbourne Age, once a great liberal newspaper whose journalists produced a pioneering charter of editorial independence, is often just another purveyor of what Orwell called “smelly little orthodoxies”, wrapped in lifestyle supplements. Flickering beacons are the visionary Special Broadcasting Service (SBS), which was set up to serve Australia’s multi-ethnic society, and the eternally battered ABC.

The ABC is different from the BBC, its model, in one crucial respect. It has no licence fee and must rely on government handouts. In Australia, political intimidation of the national broadcaster makes Downing Street’s campaign against the BBC seem almost genteel. Howard’s minister for communications, a far-right dullard called Richard Alston, recently demanded that the ABC reply to 68 counts of “anti-Americanism”. What the government wants is no less than an oath of loyalty to the foreign power to which it has surrendered sovereignty.

Charges of “left-wing bias”, familiar in Britain and just as ridiculous, drone out of both the Murdoch and non-Murdoch press. A Sydney Morning Herald commentator, a local echo of the far right’s “monitoring” of the media in America, has attacked the ABC for years. With no guarantee of financial independence, the ABC has bent to the pressure; the censorship experienced by Richard Flanagan is not unusual. More seriously, current affairs investigations that might be construed as “left wing” are not commissioned. As one well-known journalist told

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me: “We have a state of fear. If you’re a dissenter, you’re out.”

The despair felt by many Australians about this, and the cosmetic democracy in Canberra that it reflects, expresses itself in huge turnouts at public meetings. More than 34,000 attended the recent Melbourne Writers’ Festival, where, said the director, “anything political” and “any session that allowed people to express a view” was a sell-out.

The global model for censorship by omission in free societies is America, which constitutionally has the freest press in the world. In Washington, Charles Lewis, the former CBS 60 Minutes producer who runs the Centre for Public Integrity, told me: “Under Bush, the silence among journalists is worse than in the 1950s. Murdoch is the most influential media mogul in America; he sets the standard, and there is no public discussion about it. Why do 70 per cent of the American public believe Saddam Hussein was behind the attacks of 9/11? Because the media’s constant echoing of the government guarantees it. Without the complicity of journalists, Bush would never have attacked Iraq.”

Harnessing journalism and reducing it to the “spokesman’s spokesman”, a branch of corporate and government public relations, is the hidden agenda of the new media deregulators. In the US, the Federal Communications Commission (run by Colin Powell’s son) is finally to deregulate television so that Murdoch’s Fox Channel and four other conglomerates control 90 per cent of the terrestrial and cable audience. That is the spectre in Britain, with a Blairite placeman now overseeing public service broadcasting in the new commercial deregulator, Oftel, which has a remit to follow the American “market” path. The next step is to end the licence fee and diminish the BBC to a version of its Australian prodigy. That is Blair’s agenda.

The genesis for this – and for the current Blair/Murdoch campaign against the BBC’s independence – can be traced back to 1995, when Murdoch flew the Blairs first class to Hayman Island, off the Queensland coast. In the tropical sunshine and standing at the blue News Corp lectern, the future British prime minister waxed lyrical about his “new moral purpose in politics” and pledged himself to hand over the media to the “enterprise” of those like his host, who applauded him warmly. The next day, satire died again when Murdoch’s Sun commented: “Mr Blair has vision, he has purpose and he speaks our language on morality and family life.” **JP**