

**LAST WEEK WE DISCUSSED** the Foreign Correspondents Club 'Book Break' on a book about the Nanking Incident and asked the question, essentially: are journalists limited by the demands of their profession? Because they have to get their 'story', does that mean that their understanding is limited to what are called the facts? That is, does their training qualify them only to seek out the Numbers, the When, the What and the Who, rather than the really difficult Why of the events and issues that they are paid to report? After all, if the facts and the numbers were all that mattered, government statistics would be best sellers and accountants would be film stars. This week we will look at the role of journalism from 2 angles:

### **1. The Democratic Deficit: journalism as the de facto opposition**

### **2. The historical shaping of the journalistic mindset**

#### **1. The democratic deficit\*\* [民主的欠如 *minshuteki ketsujo*(?)]**

There is a structural flaw in the politics of modern industrialized states. In theory, the US, the nations of Europe (including Britain), and most Asian nations are representative democracies. We, the electors, vote for our political representatives who then become members of Parliament, the House of Representatives, the Diet [国会], *Bundestag*, *Camera dei Deputati*, *Assemblée Nationale Française* and so on.

The representatives are, collectively, the sovereign power. Their task is to represent us but in practice it doesn't quite work like that because our representatives see their primary role as being representatives of their political party, and they pay just enough attention to their electorate in order to get re-elected every few years. In effect, power has been devolved from the electorate to the political parties, and in particular to the leader of whichever party is in government.

Thus, given a big enough majority, the prime minister or the president of most democracies can do more or less what he likes, and the only brake on his power is how much he can get his own backbenchers to agree to. A leader can, after winning a general election, in effect take the phone to the electorate off the hook for the next 3 or 4 or 5 years. This is not an accident, it is the way the system is supposed to work: a fundamental democratic deficit designed to deliver functioning majorities of power with a minority share of the vote, and to maintain a permanently empowered class of politicians and civil servants. In the United States, the involvement of Congress in the minute details of government, the huge influence of lobbyists and a frenetic election timetable, all further contribute to the democratic deficit.

When you make this point to anyone involved in active politics, they usually respond with a question: 'What about capital punishment?' The idea being that if more power was given to ordinary people, the nation's lampposts would immediately be hung with lynched paedophiles. And the answer to that, in turn, is: 'What about Iraq?' A system without a democratic deficit would never have gone to war, and would certainly not have gone to war with the main political parties voting in favour.

2 This democratic deficit has caused the role of the press to mutate into that of the *de facto* opposition. The system is insensitive to popular opinion but at the same time there is more and more opportunity for the expression, and manufacture, of popular opinion. The electoral cycle in most democracies is between 3 and 5 years. The news cycle ideally generates new headlines at least 3 or 4 times a day, especially when there is a fast-breaking scandal or moral panic. Politicians don't feel that the press represents anyone apart from itself, and they think it is arrogant and unaccountable, and the press feels the same way about the politicians, and both are right.

As a result, relations between government and media in most democracies are always going to be oppositional. For left of centre political parties, there is a further complication, in that newspapers proprietors tend to be right-wing. The choice is between ignoring the relevant newspapers or courting them. In Britain, after leading New Labour to a historic election victory in 1997 Prime Minister Tony Blair decided to court the media, because the press, especially the Murdoch presses and especially *The Sun*, had played a central role in ('old') Labour's defeat in 1992.

Three years earlier, when Blair took over as leader in 1994, he knew he had to court the press, in particular the right wing media. So began of the unhealthy relationship with the press that characterised the Blair years [1997-2007] in Britain. In particular, the onset of 'spin' as practiced by Blair's right-hand man, former journalist Alistair Campbell (former Conservative leader Michael Howard): <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3H-HdizCnh8>

[\*\**London Review of Books*: Sep. 2007]

## **2. The historical shaping of the journalistic mindset**

The democratic deficit is not a recent phenomenon, and nor is the role of journalists as opposition. Still, we need to understand how it came about *historically* the journalists' mindset has been shaped to look for stories that stand up not just on the page but *in court*. Because journalists have long been the subject of legal and political pressures that have meant that they have had to prove beyond a doubt that what they write is true. Because sometimes the truth has been the only thing that kept them out of prison, or worse, although at other times, writing the truth has not in itself been any guarantee of survival.

These days, a story about a celebrity or about an action by government has not only to be true and provable but also has to run the gauntlet of 'public interest'. Under this stern test, where the criteria are far from libertarian or idealistic, the question is asked: does it benefit the people to know the truth about an aspect of a person's private life or a politician's public statements that that person would prefer kept unpublished? The fact that the question needs to be asked at all shows that in some ways journalism has slipped backwards in its relationship to government. Surely the truth is an absolute and the people's right to know indisputable? Or is it?

### **'Holding truth to power' – a potted history**

In the Reformation period in European history, it took Protestants in Europe and Britain to defy the censorious power of Rome and the Catholic Church. In the English Civil War (1642-8), republicans and dissenters toppled the monarchy. One of the great tracts spurring them on was John Milton's great call for the public right to known in *Areopagitica*:

3.

'Give me the freedom to know, to utter and to argue freely according to conscience, above all liberties.'

**'Above all liberties' ~ including burglary?**

This period saw the first great flowering of English journalism. Pre-publication censorship was abolished and radical journalism flourished. The greatest and sharpest writing of this age has come down to us from the extraordinary talents of radical journalists such as Jonathan Swift, Daniel Defoe, Joseph Addison, Richard Steele, John Wilkes and Thomas Paine, author of *The Rights of Man*. These were all writers whose work stood head and shoulders above the work of so many others in their profession not only at the time before but ever since.

At the same time, they were only too conscious of the moral ambiguities of their profession, as Daniel Defoe put it ~

Persons are employed ... to haunt coffee houses and thrust themselves into companies where they are not known; or plant themselves at convenient distances to overhear what is said... The same persons hang and loiter about the publick offices like housebreakers, waiting for an interview with some little clerk or a conference with a door keeper in order to come at a little news, or an account of transactions; for which the fee is a shilling, or a pint of wine.

Here we have the journalist as burglar. But is this so antiquated a picture? Doesn't this compare with the journalist as confidence man? More recently, for example, Truman Capote's factual novel 'In Cold Blood' described a bloody family tragedy with chilling realism through facts obtained by befriending and gaining the sympathy of those involved ~ and then writing them up and getting clear of the resulting legal *furor*.

**BETWEEN BUSINESS AND POLITICS**

A free and vigorous press was becoming an increasingly powerful aspect of British life in the 18th century. The Press located itself in Fleet Street, then a tatty thoroughfare connecting the City towards, London's business district in the Eastern end of the capital, to Westminster in the centre: the seat of political power.

In establishing itself in Fleet Street, the British press pitched its tent between business and politics. This created a tension which has both energized and injured it ever since. Newspapers are businesses that sell journalism. But they also, increasingly, sell advertising space. (They also sell power, but that's another story). Today they depend on advertising revenue to survive. The real cost of a newspaper or a TV license would be beyond the reach of most people were it not for the fact that these media provide a market place. You read the story, you notice the product ~ you may buy it. If you do, you help the publisher or TV company management or internet search engine owner keep the price of his newspaper

4. competitive, so that he (for media magnates are usually male) can sell more copies and therefore tell his advertisers that the advertising 'reach' of his media is that much more extensive.

**FOR JOURNALISTS**, the question that has grown increasingly central to their life and purpose has become: what do they have to do, how far do they have to go to get their story and, most important, what price do they have to pay to ensure that their media shareholders can get a return on their investment, and that the journalists themselves can be sure of their wages.

When Tom Paine published *The Rights of Man* in 1775, he set off what has arguably been called the 'big bang' of journalism that was a direct consequence of the Revolution that exploded just under a decade later in France. Paine argued that human beings have a right to govern themselves rather than be governed by privilege and so-called Divine Right, or by those who benefited from inherited titles and powers.

**THE IDEALS OF MILTON AND PAINE** are written into the heart of the American Constitution, where the First Amendment holds that: "Congress shall make no law abridging the freedom of speech or the press."

Paine's ideas were part of the maelstrom of thought that inspired the French Revolution, but journalists were just as much a victim of that Revolution as the aristocracy and the bourgeoisie. Nevertheless, journalism started to become the engine of modern democracies as a direct result of the bloodbath of France's revolutionary years.

Some say that French journalism today has its roots buried too deep in the political pamphlet and the philosophical essay than in the witnessed news report: thus it is more intellectually challenging than, say, the British or US press, but far less confrontational, i.e. French journalists are soft on the powerful, that they give them an easy time. It is true that a much less is said about politicians' private lives in France than in the US or Britain – while at the same time the French pride themselves on their national virility ('The French have sex; the English have hot water bottles'), which seems a bit of a contradiction in terms.

The French say that they're more grown up than the Western media when it comes to political scandals, especially those involving the sexual peccadilloes of the great and good. In Britain, sexual scandals blow up every few years, like the World Cup. One of the best known was the 1960's Profumo Affair. It almost always seems to be the Conservative politicians who get into the most embarrassing situations, whereas the US public – though not the press – seemed at one point to be moving closer to Gallic tolerance during the Monica Lewinsky scandal. So it's not just a matter of language: the French aren't more grown up just because theirs is the language of Voltaire and Racine, although that may be part of it. Maybe it's just that humanity itself, now and then, has begun to show signs of maturity. We've grown old, and now we're beginning to grow up (?)

The story of the press is far more than the story of Western liberal democracy. China had official information sheets [*tipao*] centuries before the West. China also led the West in suppressing the press during the Sung dynasty (960-1279).

The attitude of the Chinese authorities to press freedom today is being severely tested. From a Western liberal standpoint, it all looks pretty severe. But the entire history of the rise of Chinese nationalism, which ended with the ejection of the Western powers (and the Guomindang, who started the process) in 1949, is also the history of the modern Chinese press, because as Nationalism flourished in the wake of the May 4th movement of 1919, so did newspapers. Newspapers carried the national story in China when it was part of so many countries' 'informal empire'. It was only when the country was united and the national story changed that the press had to be reined in, for fear that it might lead to national disunity.

In Singapore, the central paradox is how the government can be simultaneously committed to one of the most sophisticated communications infrastructures on the planet while also running one of the planet's most restricted media.

Japan's press enjoys constitutional protection enshrining the principle of press freedom, a legacy of the 'American' constitution established during the early, idealistic years of the Occupation. However, to any Westerner reading the Japanese newspapers, this principle is hardly visible. Japanese journalism works through negotiation, collaboration and consensus, say its defenders. The rules are unofficial, but strictly obeyed by a network of press clubs (*kisha kurabu*) all linked to major institutional or industrial sources of power. The clubs ensure that both sides play a certain game designed to avoid embarrassment and misunderstanding. In the eyes of its (mostly) Western critics, (understandably, since they're usually kept out of them) these clubs neuter and homogenize Japanese journalism through the management of news flows.

To give a personal example: I published, in English, a story about the history of the Japan Times, which on March 22 2007 celebrated its 110th year of publication. The story is here: [PDF JAPAN TIMES](#) This is the second time I have published a story showing the historical links between the Japanese Foreign Ministry and the press, in other words, government propaganda. The other story is here: <http://www.fccj.or.jp/~fccjyod2/node/1186> My second story is currently being considered for publication in Japanese by one of Japan's main newspapers: if they reject it, do I tell myself it's because it was never much of a story anyway, or do I comfort myself with the thought that it has been rejected because it disturbs vested interests within the establishment? Of course I prefer the second thought, but the first may also be true. Writing a good story depends more on doubting yourself and the quality of your information than it does on thinking that what you have to say is going to change the world ~ self-confidence is never a guarantee of quality ~ so that I shall probably go for the first thought, and move on. But this is, more or less, an encapsulation of the situation of many Western writers in Japan, whether they are journalists or, like myself, media historians who do the odd bit of freelance work.

~ was built on the foundations of European liberalism. The Scots utilitarian philosopher James Mill believed that the dangers of a timid press were greater than the dangers of its opposite. Mill believed that the political stability, for better or worse, of Britain, Holland, and the US, compared with the bloody turmoil of revolutionary France, had much to do with the fact that the press in France was excessively controlled. In other words, that political stability arose from press freedom, not the opposite. A press that cuddled up to the government led to the building up of uncontrollable pressures among the people and the politically engaged. His case may be argued by historians discussing the causes of the Chinese Revolution of 1911, the Russian Revolution of 1917, and the near-revolution in post-war Japan – in the late 1940s and in the early 1960s – both of which were neatly nipped in the bud by that bastion of press freedom, the United States.

A century later, Mill's grandson, John Stuart Mill, delivered the case for political and economic liberalism in his 1859 essay, *On Liberty* ~

The peculiar evil of silencing an expression of opinion is that it is robbing the human race; posterity as well as the existing generation; those who dissent from the opinion, still more than those who hold onto it. If the opinion is right, they are deprived of the opportunity of exchanging error for truth: if wrong, they lose, what is almost as great a benefit, the clearer perception and livelier impression of truth, produced by its collision with error.

Liberals were the friends of press freedom, politically and commercially, opposing special taxes on newspapers (the newspaper stamp) as vigorously as they supported press freedom. This has led us all along some strange roads, whereby the *National Enquirer* is free to declare that Elvis has been seen 'live on Mars' while its British equivalent is free to inform us that the Queen has a rubber duck in her bath ~ information obtained by a journalist posing as a royal footman (she also uses Tupperware at the breakfast table) (and I have it on reliable information that her habits on Saturday racing afternoons are alarmingly close to those of her subjects...)

In time, the bigger newspapers, untaxed and fattening up on growing advertising revenues, became the strongest champions of press freedom: the fat cats of the media were among its greatest liberals. Today Rupert Murdoch considers himself a champion of democracy and the free press (but he was the first to move the press out of Fleet Street and eastwards to Canary Wharf, that is, back towards the City and away from politics and Westminster ~ *The Sun*, which first told the world about the Queen's bathtime rubber duck habit, is one of his best-selling titles – for more on the vital issues of the day see <http://www.musashino-u.ac.jp/gensha/oconnor/waseda/WJW/WasedaSILSJJournalismWeek5.pdf>

**However (there is always a however),** the media fat cats and their market-based liberal press model hit the peak of its political power and allowed them to establish their most effective networks of information and communication at just that point that Western political power, in the shape of the British empire, was at last coming under assault.



Not that long after, the press empires of the 19th and 20th centuries were also seriously challenged: first from radio, then from television and, towards the end of the 20th century, from the Internet. *The Guardian*, a title belong to one of Britain's most traditionally liberal, but profitable, newspaper groups, has sales of under 500,000 paper copies in the UK, but an online readership of around 70,000,000 [70 million]. In effect, the wood and trees edition is being subsidized by the Guardianunlimited at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/> At the moment, nobody pays for the online edition – it pays for itself through advertising – but that may change ~

The important point about all these new technologies – radio, television and the Internet – is that their roots are all in government or in licensed monopolies. Radio, television and the Internet were privately invented technologies for the most part that were quickly taken over by government, which took the view that new communications technologies should be owned or licensed by the State.

As the 20th century came to an end, analogue radio and television moved over to digital broadcasting technologies and it became possible for broadcasting to be transmitted globally, new challenges emerged. Now that newspapers, radio and TV can all share delivery platforms on the net, should they be regulated separately or together ~ and since they had become a global phenomenon, who should do the regulating?

And yet, and yet ~ there are as many reasons to hope that the freedoms that Tom Paine and John Milton so idealized will eventually become global freedoms as there are to believe that they will always be marginalized and channelled by concerned governments. But it takes courage to push where pushing is not allowed. Watch journalist Nagai Kenji in Myanmar in September 2007: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gF3h5x\\_2yuM&mode=related&search=](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gF3h5x_2yuM&mode=related&search=)

The more vicious the repression, the more eloquent the result. Where is the mind that could have scripted this scenario? <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9-nXT8lSnPQ>