

A PLEA FOR MORAL GRAVITY

*For the past 10 years journalist and author **PAUL JOHNSON** has written a controversial weekly column on British media. Here he surveys a decade of change and hope for British journalism*

IT is now over 10 years since I began a column analysing and criticising the British media from a position within it. During that period, media power and influence have continued to grow, so that the term I have coined for the typical modern Western state, Media Democracy, has acquired growing validity and my further term for the arrogance with which some of its practitioners wield this power, Media Triumphalism, is, alas, more valid than ever.

In some ways the Western media now has more impact on events than Western governments. Mikhail Gorbachev in captivity was able to receive vital information, which stiffened his resolve, from the BBC World Service at a time when George Bush and John Major tried and failed to make contact with him. Boris Yeltsin, throughout the coup, brilliantly exploited the Western media to encourage his followers and demoralise his opponents.

I notice that increasing use is made by oppressed people, whether in the Baltic States or Croatia, Asia or Africa, of the chance to air their grievances in the Western media. The placards carrying their demands and slogans are now written in English. They address themselves directly to us, via newspaper photographs and television screens. All this growing authority should make Western media bosses, editors, producers, not the least reporters, awesomely conscious of the enormous responsibilities they now carry, to the truth, to justice and to civilisation.

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They are technically more competent than ever before, even if their English lacks elegance and often grammar and syntax; and they have a broader knowledge of the world than earlier generations of communicators.

What makes me tremble is the evident lack of moral training, their semi-detachment from the Judaeo-Christian system of ethics which, more than ever before, is now the only sheet-anchor for a world adrift on an ocean of doubt and fear.

Too many people in the media find it difficult to make principled and systematic distinctions between right and wrong because they have simply never been taught how to do so.

Over this decade I have tried to convince people in the media that the task of communicating accurate information to the public is a profoundly moral occupation, demanding the highest standards, as well as a commercial business. There are certain practical points to which I have devoted much attention.

The first was the need for newspapers and television stations to work in a climate of political and economic freedom. That has now largely been accomplished, at any rate in Britain. Union monopoly power, and with it union censorship, was decisively broken at Wapping and the events which followed. Newspapers can now manage themselves. New ones can be launched successfully, often by people of modest means. Broadcasting has been thrown open, the duopoly broken, and during the 1990s we are going to see much more variety and (in my judgement) high quality. I feel that I have helped to win a

PLEASE TURN OVER

number of key battles here, and I believe the 1990s will be a magnificent decade for the British media.

On the other hand, on two critical issues my campaigns have so far failed. The operating arms of the BBC and ITV are still mainly controlled by a left-liberal establishment, whose devotion to accuracy is not always beyond doubt – to put it mildly – and who do not understand what political objectivity means. Rather like Gorbachev, they have been brought up (especially since the 1960s) in a certain closed politico-moral climate and remain the prisoners of it. My consolation is that during the 1990s these people will gradually disappear. Equally, I have failed to persuade newspapers that invasion of privacy is now the cardinal sin of British journalism and must cease or be punished in the courts. They are demonstrably incapable of self-reform, and I am more convinced than ever that parliament will be forced to legislate, to make privacy invasion a tort and, in really

serious cases, a criminal offence. This will come in the next two or three years.

In one area I have been delighted by the progress made. I used to complain, long and often, at the absence of women in the higher reaches of journalism, and in particular at the failure of proprietors to appoint women editors. My pleas went unheeded but suddenly, almost overnight it seemed, women broke through this barrier, and are now increasingly in positions of power throughout the media – though I am still waiting for one to be appointed editor of a quality national newspaper.

What is equally welcome is the prominent role of women reporters, often in positions of great stress and danger, in bringing us the latest news. They are doing it, too, with enviable professional skill and sometimes with real distinction.

I repeat my contention that by the earlier years of the next century, the media will be increasingly run by women: they are just better at it than men. The rise of women in the media, and of course I mean normal women, not

ideologues, feminists, libbers, lesbians etc, is an important part of the way in which the media is being democratised under the pressure of market forces.

Market democracy is the most reliable guarantee of every other form of democracy – including the right to vote – and that is why the media should be gradually stripped of its monopolies and duopolies, its subsidies and any special legal privileges, and be thrown open to the maximum competition, the paying public being the only arbiter, and the ordinary law of the land the only judge.

Those who defend the expiring system, the vested interests, are people who think they know better than you or me, reader. Like Boris Yeltsin, I believe in People Power. And, having said that, I now relinquish the position of self-appointed scourge of the media. ●

PAUL Johnson, a former Editor of the New Statesman and author of numerous best-selling books, writes for The Spectator.

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non-sexist, non-hetero-sexist,
non-ageist, non-regionalist,
non-elitist, nuclear-free
and ozone-friendly.**

but never, never PC (Politically Correct)

Vrye Weekblad

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