

THE MEDIA AND RADICAL STATISTICS

Wendy Moore

Radical statisticians know perhaps more than most the importance of factual and impartial information being readily available to all. People need accurate and unbiased information on which to make the major decisions in their lives.

Yet it is clear we cannot rely on the general media - the main source of information for the majority of people - to do this. Newspapers, television and radio tend to accept government inspired information with little question. They rarely seek to present alternative viewpoints unless it is to undermine them. They almost always lean towards - or unabashedly support - the establishment line. And they generally allow the establishment to set their agendas for them. Hence the chronic underfunding of the health service over many years only becomes a story when doctors complain and - even more importantly - babies died. Similarly, the changes in the Social Security Act - which poverty campaigners warned many months ago would bring wholesale deprivation - only become 'news' when journalists are presented face to face with the victims of the reforms and even Conservative MPs are complaining that things have gone too far.

In addition, mistakes, inaccuracies and plain fabrication are a serious problem in today's media. And when they do, increasingly, occur the people they affect have little or no opportunity to set the record straight.

It was with good reason, then, that the recent Radical Statistics annual conference 'Beyond the smokescreen' centred on the media. Understanding the smokescreen is the first step towards attempting to use the media effectively and to, ultimately, bringing about reforms to create a better, fairer media.

So, first of all, what is wrong with the media? The fundamental problem is a question of haves and have nots. The haves have control over and access to the media. It is this tiny minority of people who can truly be said to enjoy press freedom. The have nots - the rest of us - are denied both access and control.

In Britain seven of the 11 national dailies are owned by four companies. Four out of nine Sunday newspapers are owned by two companies. Most local newspapers are owned by four newspaper empires. This obvious monopoly over ownership inevitably leads to a narrow range of choice. And since newspaper owners currently need to be extremely rich in order to own a newspaper, most tend to be pro-establishment. Such a narrow range of choice, with such narrow views, can hardly be deemed healthy for democracy.

The power situation is little different in broadcasting. There the government of the day has even more direct control in choosing the governors who control the BBC. The Government has also made clear its intention to end the regulations which have

ensured some standards in television and to allow franchises for ITV to be sold off to the highest bidder. We know too that newspaper magnates such as Robert Maxwell and Rupert Murdoch are poised to move into broadcasting - and the implications for quality must be obvious.

No one would suggest that media owners exercise direct daily control over everything we see or hear. The power structure is much more subtle. Since media magnates are almost all white, male and pro-establishment, the editors they hire are generally in the same vein. These editors then hire the journalists who most reflect their views. Journalists who challenge such views are rarely employed in the national media. And there are few women or black journalists in these positions.

Set against this undemocratic background, journalistic standards have undergone an alarming decline. Since profit is the main motive governing the media, the truth comes second place to selling newspapers or winning audiences. Cheque book journalism, sensationalised stories, distortion and straightforward lying have become commonplace. Yet there is no effective check on declining standards, nor do the public have any genuine redress when unjustly villified by the media. Complaining to the Press Council is a waste of time. Last year it received more than 1,000 complaints - twice the number sent to it 10 years ago. Yet it upheld just 5.7 per cent. This is not surprising since the Press Council is funded almost entirely by newspaper proprietors. The Press Council acts as a very effective insurance policy - against media proprietors having to take notice of public concern.

The Broadcasting Complaints Commission is little better. It is scarcely known, exceedingly slow and usually sides with the producers.

So just as access to the media is only in reality open to a few, redress for inaccurate and biased stories is also available only to a privileged minority - those who can afford the small fortune needed to take out a libel suit. It might seem that the Government should be able to relax in the knowledge that it has the media exactly where it wants it. And yet the Thatcher Government has taken every step to restrict further the information available to us. Since 1979 the Government has banned a range of films from our television screens; censored what we can read in newspapers and banned books. It has used both the police and the courts as tools to impose secrecy. And it has brought in restrictions censoring what local authorities are allowed to tell us.

In many instances, of course, the Government simply prevents important information ever reaching the media in the first place. Radical Statisticians will be particularly aware of the way the Government changes the rules on unemployment figures in a bid to reduce the dole queue; selects the figures it likes and discards those it dislikes when attempting to defend its record on NHS spending and, when all else fails, simply abolishes the collection of information which might prove embarrassing such as its plan to end the breaking down of

Census material into social classes.

All in all the picture looks bleak. But knowing the problems is halfway to solving them. In the longer term we need radical and far-reaching reforms of the media. The Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom was set up nine years ago in order to challenge some of the common myths about the media and to campaign for change. The Campaign has drawn up a manifesto of reforms needed to bring about that change. Among the demands are:

- *A legal restriction on the monopoly in newspapers and broadcasting

- *A Media Enterprise Board to provide start-up funds for new and diverse publications

- *A legal right of reply to enable members of the public to simply and quickly correct inaccuracies which affect them. Such a right already exists in nine other European countries.

- *A Media Commission to oversee the right of reply and set down ethical standards, replacing both the Press Council and the Broadcasting Complaints Commission.

- *Repeal of the Official Secrets Act and a new Freedom of Information Act.

Support from organisations such as the Radical Statistics Group will help make these aims a reality. But in the meantime there are practical ways in which it is possible to try to use the media to your advantage. Here are some which might go some way towards getting the Radical Statistics message across.

1. Get to know your market

National newspapers reach most people but are difficult to get into. Local newspapers are often more sympathetic and keen to fill space. Radio interviews need quick responses but offer more control over the product. Radio phone-ins are a useful medium to tap. Television is difficult to penetrate but establishing yourself as an expert and making yourself available for studio audiences are possible ways in. Specialist magazines are often your best bet, usually taking a positive interest in your field, but reaching a small audience.

2. Choose the type of coverage you want

- *News stories: News reporters like sensational, graphic, topical stories with human interest. Use this to your advantage by providing human interest by supplying people to interview; setting up photograph opportunities; linking your story with an already topical event or issue; provide a 'leaked' document (no matter how important the information, the leak will make it news); bringing in a celebrity to add interest or setting up an unusual stunt. If your story does not lend itself to any of these (or you want to keep your principles intact) choose another form of coverage. Take heart from the knowledge that journalists' news values are not necessarily anything to do with what the public wants or needs to know.

- *Features: Features allow more detail, are often more positive and take a more in-depth look at an issue. Local newspapers are often anxious for ideas, nationals inundated with them.

Offer to write a piece yourself as an 'expert' in a field.

*Letters: Some letters are cut but in general they provide the opportunity to get a message across, albeit to a limited readership.

3. Grabbing attention

*Press releases: Most go in the bin so make yours interesting, short and easy to read. Write the piece like a news story - in the way you might expect it to appear in print. Include some lively quotes and give some - not too many - figures. Add a headline on top. Make sure it contains the date and the name of someone to contact with a daytime telephone number.

*Press conferences: In general, don't. Journalists detest being dragged out of the office to hear something they could have picked up over the telephone. Only go ahead if you have something extremely important to say - and usually someone pretty important to say it.

*Build up personal contacts: This is perhaps the surest way to success. There is no substitute for a relationship of trust with a journalist. Either make contact with a specialist in your field or cultivate a journalist who is sympathetic to your concerns. Keep up regular contact, offering news stories; advice or an alternative view to establishment information. You can speak 'off the record' to a journalist you trust - but ensure you make this clear before you do. Remember, however, that the journalist you speak to does not enjoy total control over what appears in print or on the air.

4. Get to know deadlines

The best story in the world is useless when it misses the deadline. Make sure you know the deadlines journalists are working to. The rule is generally the earlier the better.

5. Offer a specialist service

Journalists work under great pressure and often find it easier to repeat the statements contained in government press releases without questioning. They cannot be expected to be experts in all areas or in every aspect of a particular subject. They may welcome, therefore, a quick and easy reference point to provide an alternative analysis of the latest government figures or a new angle on a topical issue. Emphasise your expertise in a field, offer your help and make sure you are readily contactable.

6. What to do if it goes wrong?

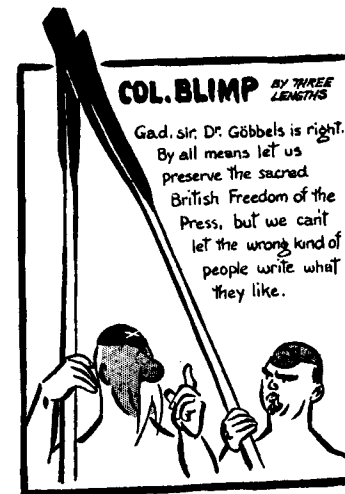
*Right of reply: Inaccuracies can be accidental in which case a newspaper or programme should be happy to provide a correction. Ask for this to be of the same length as the inaccuracy, to be given the same prominence and to appear promptly. If you are refused a correction, seek the help of the National Union of Journalists (NUJ) chapel at the office. Where an article is one-sided or biased, demand a right of reply in which to put over the other side. The right of reply is not yet a legal right but it is a moral one - and pressing for it often meets with success.

*Letters: Letters allow you to correct a wrong impression but they may be cut or not appear at all. You can demand that a letter appears if an editor refuses a genuine right of reply.

*NUJ Ethics Council: The NUJ does not recognise the Press Council because it is ineffectual. But all of its members - and most national newspaper journalists are members - have agreed to abide by a Code of Conduct, setting out basic standards of accuracy, impartiality and fairness. The union accepts complaints from members of the public who believe a journalist has breached part of the Code. These are heard by its Ethics Council. The council can reprimand or recommend fines or suspension for journalists. Contact the NUJ at Acorn House, 314 Grays Inn Road, London WC1X 8DP.

For more information about the Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom write to the CPBF, 9 Poland Street, London W1.

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