



In defence of the mass media

Michiel van Hulten



In many Western democracies, the relationship between politics and the media is becoming increasingly tense. Several recent clashes between politicians and journalists attest to this. In the UK, allegations that the Government had 'sexed up' its dossier on Iraqi weapons of mass destruction led to a protracted battle between the government and the BBC, culminating in the resignation of the BBC Chairman and Director-General. In Italy, the President of the board of RAI, Lucia Annunziata, announced earlier this year that she was stepping down to make it clear that the bounds of pluralism have been overstepped and that this board is operating illegitimately [1] - a reference to the new media ownership law that left the Berlusconi empire intact. In Spain, the state press agency EFE and several other media outlets were accused (and found guilty) of colluding with the Aznar government to maintain the fiction that ETA was behind the March 11th bombings in Madrid, just days ahead of a general election.

There are other, more latent signs of tension as well. Politicians from both ends of the political spectrum have suggested that the media are out of control and something must be done. From the Right, newspapers and television and radio stations are under attack for their alleged promotion of liberal, anti-establishment and immoral attitudes and values. Violent films, reality TV and sexually explicit programming are said to contribute to the degeneration of moral and ethical standards in society. Public broadcasting is accused of left-wing bias. Dutch Justice minister Piet Hein Donner is one of the standard-bearers of this tendency. In November 2003, he complained that satirical TV programmes aimed at the royal family threatened to undermine the stability of the monarchy. In May 2004 he issued a warning, during a speech to a conference on the media, that press freedom is not absolute. He argued that an increasing share of the government's workload consisted of correcting erroneous reporting by journalists. In any other sector of the economy, the minister said, he state would already have intervened. While much of the public as well as many journalists and politicians shared Donner's concerns about the quality of programming and reporting, his thinly veiled threat to legislate against media excesses was seen as an outright attack on the freedom of the press.

From the Left, the media are charged with a lack of factual accuracy (and a refusal to correct mistakes, such as in the case of the BBC's reporting over the 'sexed up' dossier on Iraqi weapons of mass destruction), an obsession with trivial issues over serious reporting and an editorial policy increasingly influenced by commercial considerations. TV programming is being 'dumbed down' to suit the tastes of a larger audience. Public broadcasting's eagerness to prove its neutrality, the Left complains, leads to the Right being given an easy ride, and its negative portrayal of the political world leads to voter cynicism and a lower turnout at elections. Furthermore, the concentration of private media companies in the hands of a few powerful (and generally right-wing) magnates means that the pluralism of the media landscape is under threat. On the 22nd of April 2004, the European Parliament adopted a report by Dutch social-liberal MEP Johanna Boogerd-Quaak on freedom of expression and information in the EU, in which these concerns were underscored. The report focused in particular on

the Italian situation, where here could be a risk of breaches of the right to freedom of expression and information [2]. The Parliament noted that in Italy the level of concentration of the television market is currently the highest within Europe (...) One of the sectors in which the conflict of interest is most obvious is advertising (...) The Italian system presents an anomaly owing to a unique combination of economic, political and media power in the hands of one man - the current President of the Italian Council of Ministers. The report was adopted only after surviving a filibuster by the Right, led by the Parliament's largest political group, the European People's Party (EPP), of which Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi's *Forza Italia* is one of the component parts.

The developments and views described above have caused a certain amount of confusion and uncertainty among progressives. At a recent meeting of the Policy Network Democratic Renewal Working Group in Rome where this topic was discussed, the participants from the political world spoke in defence of the media whereas the journalists present were mostly critical of their own profession. In the wider world, the centre-left has tended to focus on the negative aspects of the way the media have developed over the last decade or so. I believe that to be a mistake. By effectively forming an alliance of convenience with the neo-conservative critics of broadcasting standards, the centre-left runs the danger of undermining the very goals it seeks to achieve. The key challenge facing the centre-left today is not improve the quality of programming, but to guarantee the freedom and independence of the media.

The existence of free and independent TV and radio stations and newspapers is generally taken for granted in Western society. We are concerned about press freedom in Russia, in Zimbabwe and the Arab world, but we don't generally worry about it at home. Recent Spanish experience should act as a wake-up call. The surprise victory of the Spanish socialists in the March 14th general election had one immediate and very visible consequence: the withdrawal of Spanish troops from Iraq, in keeping with the promise Socialist leader José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero had made well before Islamic fundamentalists caused death and devastation in Madrid on March 11th. But Zapatero's victory and the events immediately preceding it also had at least one other unintended but important consequence: they served to remind us of the crucial importance in modern democratic society of free, independent and critical media.

The following newspaper account makes clear to what extent the relationship between the government and the media played a central role in the last few days and hours of the campaign:

"The Spanish government pursued an aggressive campaign to persuade voters that the Madrid bombs were the work of Basque separatists, long after evidence emerged that the attacks were far more likely to have been carried out by Islamist terrorists. (...)

José María Aznar's government, which faced an election three days later, cited the type of explosives as its reason for blaming ETA when it briefed its European allies and the UN on the day of the bombings, March 11th.

Ana Palacio, foreign minister, sent instructions to Spain's ambassadors at 5.28pm that day to use every occasion to confirm the authorship of ETA.

That afternoon, ETA denied it was behind the attacks and in the evening an Islamic 'brigade' claiming to be part of Al-Qaeda said it was responsible. During the afternoon, Spanish police found a stolen van containing detonators, traces of explosives and taped verses from the Koran.

Even after this evidence, the Spanish government continued to insist ETA was its prime suspect. Mr Aznar personally rang newspaper editors that night to insist on Eta's responsibility." [3]

It didn't work. Aznar's arm-twisting was exposed first by the international and then by the Spanish media, and led to angry demonstrations against the government. Many believe that Zapatero's victory on March the 14th would not have come about without the revelation that Aznar sought to mislead the Spanish public over the Madrid bombings.

The attempt by the Spanish Prime Minister to steer the media in a particular direction, but also, for instance, the Dutch justice minister's threat to legislate against 'media excesses', underscore the fact that the independence of the media cannot be taken for granted. In recent years, debate in Western democracies has tended to concentrate on the need for new restrictions on the media - to protect the

privacy of public figures for instance, or to stop criminals from cashing in on their crimes by selling their story to a paper. These steps may still be warranted. But the media should not be prevented from exercising their scrutiny role, in particular vis-à-vis government. It may even be necessary to adopt legal measures protect the press from undue interference by governments. National codes of conduct on relations between government and the media and a new EU law on freedom of the press - to match the rules on media company ownership and broadcasting content that already exist - could form part of such a package. The Belgian police recently raided the Brussels office of *Stern* magazine, because its correspondent, Hans-Martin Tillack, is suspected of paying an EU official for supplying confidential information. Whether or not the charge is true - should the Belgian authorities be in charge of policing EU journalists, just because the European Commission is based in Brussels and Belgium has no press freedom laws?

The centre-left has traditionally put its faith in a media landscape with public sector television and radio broadcasting at its core. The arrival of commercial television and radio has often been greeted with scepticism and distrust. Yet in Spain it was public sector broadcasting that failed in its role of independent, neutral observer and commentator. In Italy, the public broadcasting organisation RAI is paralysed by the control political parties of the Left and Right exert over its day-to-day operations. While it is impossible to generalise on a subject matter that is dealt with so differently from country to country, it would seem that there is no reason why public sector broadcasters - and their news organisations in particular - should be seen as inherently better or more dependable than private sector ones. It could for instance be argued that, just as in many other sectors of the economy, government's role should not be to ensure production or to provide funding but merely to regulate, and to enforce those regulations through a quality watchdog. Along the same lines, why not issue fixed term public sector broadcasting licences to private broadcasting companies on the basis of cost and quality criteria? It is time for the centre-left to end its love affair with public broadcasting, and to recognise that while public broadcasting is useful and necessary, commercial broadcasting has often been better at providing the public with objective programming tailored to the wishes of viewers and listeners. Dumbing down it may be to some, but the fact is that precisely because commercial TV tends to bring news and current affairs programmes in formats that are more in tune with the taste of viewers and listeners, they have contributed to a democratisation of the political process.

The importance of transparent and competitive media ownership also deserves to be re-emphasised. While in the case of the Spanish elections most blame was placed on publicly owned media, it was also clear that it was, at least in part, thanks to the wide variety of the Spanish media landscape, with its national and regional, public and private media outlets that prevented the Spanish government from completing its apparent strategy. There were just too many voices that wanted to be heard. As media moguls such as Silvio Berlusconi continue to increase the size of their empires across Europe and elsewhere, the threat to the pluralism of the media landscape, as the European Parliament made clear in its resolution, becomes even greater. But unlike Mr. Aznar, these media moguls cannot be voted out of office.

Finally, the centre-left loves to hate the populist press. It's an understandable sentiment, given the right-wing orientation of many tabloid and tabloid-style newspapers. But these papers often have their finger on the pulse of the nation - much more so than the papers whose journalists and editors form part of the liberal elite in their respective countries, and whose comfortable lives in well-off urban areas tend to be unaffected by the problems - violent crime, underperforming schools, a shortage of housing, and racial tensions - faced by ordinary people. For the last five years I have been part of a campaign to rid the European Parliament of its gravy train image. We weren't getting anywhere, because German MEPs - the single largest national delegation in the Parliament - were opposed to reform. Until *Bild Zeitung*, Germany's mass circulation daily, stepped in. They printed the faces of all German MEPs opposed to reform in a two-page spread. Within days, the MEPs changed their tune. They've now adopted a code of conduct that mirrors the rules previously adopted by UK, Dutch and Scandinavian colleagues, and they're now backing reform of the EP's system of expenses. *Bild Zeitung* will never become my newspaper of choice, but in forcing German MEPs to change their position they are helping us make the Parliament a more efficient and effective institution. In doing so, they are doing democratic politics a big favour.

[1] Corriere della Sera online

[2] Report on the risks of violation, in the EU and especially in Italy, of freedom of expression and information (Article 11(2) of the Charter of Fundamental Rights) (2003/2237(INI)), European

Parliament, 22 April 2004

[3] 'EU criticism of Aznar's conduct mounts', *The Financial Times*, 26th of March 2004

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