CUDLIPP LECTURE - 22nd January 2007

Thank you Lady Cudlipp, Sir Michael, Dr Bridge, Paul Charman and students of the London College of Communication for inviting me here tonight...

All my life I have loved newspapers, been tantalised by that magic synergy of words, pictures and typography.

As a boy, the urgent 5am "file soonest" clattering of the ticker-tape telex machine in the corridor by my bedroom – my father was a New York Correspondent, a post I was later to fill – would captivate me.

At university, where my poetry tutor would fulminate against the Rothermere press, I edited the student newspaper and – in the first of countless collisions with official opprobrium that have characterised my career –transmogrified a staid and worthy product into a more than passable imitation of Hugh Cudlipp's Daily Mirror. It included, I cringe to recall, Page 3 girls, albeit totally clothed, called "Leeds Lovelies."

Mr Cudlipp was to return the compliment when the paper was named Student
Newspaper of the Year by the Daily Mirror which ran the student awards in those
days.

From university, I became a junior reporter on the Manchester Daily Express. Unlike today, the presses were in the same building as editorial, and I can still remember the ecstasy of watching my first ever news story being laboriously set in hot metal on the stone by the printers or "inkies", as we called them, who in those days often earned more than the journalists.

Those were the days of typewriters and carbon paper, overnight pages and restrictive early deadlines. Little did I dream then, that one day, as an Editor, computers would give me the freedom to put together, in its entirety, a 128 page paper in three hours between seven and ten every night.

The year of my first news story was 1970. US troops were entering Cambodia. Heath had unseated Wilson. Strikes and inflation ruled. The Mail – all 16 broadsheet pages – cost 6d and, oh yes, a ruthless antipodean called Murdoch had just purchased for peanuts Cudlipp's forlorn exercise in idealism – a leftish paper aimed at the middle market.

It was called The Sun. And in its new topless form – raw, rumbustuous and shamelessly downmarket – was to prove a staggering success. But then this was a country which devoured 24 million newspapers on a Sunday and nearly 16 every day of the week.

While on television, there was only BBC1, the newly arrived 2 and ITV, and on radio there was just Radio 1, 2, 3 and 4, Cudlipp's Mirror, a passionately political Labour paper sold 4.7million. The crusading Express, though rapidly losing Christiansen's lustre, sold 3.7m and boasted that it could "dial the world" with its dozens of foreign correspondents. On Sundays, the News of the World sold 6.3m, the Sunday Pictorial 4.9, The People 5.2 and the Sunday Express 4.3.

Truly, Britain had a gloriously free and diverse media.

And today? Well, clearly, the picture isn't exactly rosy but it's certainly not as gloomy as some would have you believe. Classified ads, those rivers of gold, may be leaching away to the web but Britain's daily national newspapers still sell an awesome 12million copies every day.

The real losers have been the Sunday newspapers which have lost nearly half their 24 million sales.

Elsewhere the picture is mixed. Cudlipp's once proud Mirror is down to 1.6 million and falling but The Sun, though struggling, still sells 3 million.

The Express, squeezed to death for profits by its pornographer owner, is down below 800,000.

And the Mail? Well, I know you'll all be extremely gratified to know, it's doing pretty well holding its circulation and selling nearly 500,000 more copies than it did in 1970. Indeed by adding *that* increase in circulation to the circulations of the Mail on Sunday and Metro - launched in 1982 and 1999 respectively - Associated has actually *added* nearly 4 million copies to the national newspaper market over the past 36 years.

And what of the so called "quality papers" - a misleading term when you consider that the Mail titles have more quality readers than most of the "quality" papers put together?

Well, I'm sorry to piss on their parade, but, with the honourable exception of the Telegraph, which, of course, is the only right-wing "quality" - The Guardian, The Independent and The Times are all losing money.

Such papers are effectively being subsidised.

So when The Times's Ms Sieghart, the very embodiment of modern free-thinking women, holds forth on feminism, she does so courtesy of the topless girls in the still vastly profitable Sun.

Equally, when The Guardian's Mr Kettle vents his spleen on the excesses of the free market he does so courtesy of the fat profits made by that fine example of the free market – The Guardian-owned Auto Trader.

And while The Guardian's Scott Trust is a magnificent construct that allows some gloriously elevated journalism – and praise be to God for that, say I, – let's not beat about the bush: subsidised papers are, by definition, unable to survive in a free market. Their journalism and values – invariably liberal, metropolitan and politically correct, and I include the pinkish Times here, - don't connect with sufficient readers to be commercially viable.

Ah, say the bien pensants, but such papers are hugely concerned for the common good. But there is a rather unedifying contradiction here. For the Subsidariat, as I shall dub them, are actually rather disdainful of common man, contemptuous even, of the papers that make profits by appealing to and connecting with millions of ordinary men and women.

How often do you read in the Subsidariat, or hear on Newsnight, contemptuous references to the tabloid press as if it was some disembodied monster rather than the very embodiment of the views of the great majority of the British people.

Fair enough, you might say. The tabloid press – and it's getting confusing here, because The Times and The Independent are, of course, tabloids now – is big enough to look after itself.

Except I don't think it *is* fair because such arguments ignore the ever burgeoning growth of the most powerful media organisation in the world. I refer, of course, to the hugely subsidised BBC.

And it's my contention in this lecture that the Subsidariat, dominated by the BBC monolith, is distorting Britain's media market, crushing journalistic pluralism and imposing a mono culture that is inimical to healthy democratic debate.

Now before the liberal commentators reach for their vitriol – and, my goodness, how they demonise anyone who disagrees with them – let me say that I would die in a ditch defending the BBC as a great civilising force. I, for one, would pay the licence fee just for Radio 4.

But as George Orwell said "to see what is in front of one's nose requires constant struggle". And what is in front of one's nose is that the BBC, a behemoth that bestrides Britain is, as Cudlipp might have put it, TOO BLOODY BIG, TOO BLOODY PERVASIVE AND TOO BLOODY POWERFUL.

Firstly, consider the sheer vast size of the Corporation which is, despite its bleating about being underfunded, a conglomerate that employs 26,000 people, has a vast £3.2bn budget, and thinks nothing of paying £18m to a chat show host.

Then consider this: the BBC employs more journalists and their support staff, - 3,500 - and spends more on them - £½ billion - than do all the national daily newspapers put together.

Pervasiveness? Where there was once just a handful of channels the BBC now has an awesome stranglehold on the airwaves reaching into every home every hour of the day. Like an amoeba, that reproduces itself by fission, the Corporation just grows and grows.

On TV there's BBC1, BBC2, BBC3, BBC4, News 24 and BBC World. Then there's Radios One, Two, Three, Four, Five Live, Five Live Sports Extra, 1Xtra, BBC6 Music, BBC7, BBC Asian Network and, of course, the BBC World Service.

On the web, bbc.co.uk has a staggering 53% of the British online audience and the Corporation has just earmarked a £350m war-chest to expand into social networking on the internet.

The BBC has 15 regional TV services across England plus 40 local radio stations and now – in a move that has huge implications for newspapers - is considering launching over 60 local TV news stations across the UK.

No wonder Britain's hard pressed provincial press complains it can't compete against such firepower, our ailing commercial radio sector is furious that the market is rigged against it by subsidy, while our nascent internet firms rage they're not competing on a level playing field.

No wonder ITV, admittedly aided and abetted by some pretty incompetent management, is reeling on the ropes, while ITN is a shadow of its glorious former self and – wrested from its traditional time slot – News at Ten has become News at When and barely manages an audience of 2m compared to the 10m in its glory days.

But it's not the BBC's ubiquity, so much greater than Fleet Street's, that is worrying but its power to impose - under the figleaf of impartiality - its own world view.

Now I don't want to go over old ground. So let's not dwell here on the fact that in the early days, manipulated by Campbell and Mandelson, the BBC was almost an official arm of New Labour. Just what was it doing holding special news events such as NHS Day which was nothing more than blatant Government propaganda. And if you don't accept that just ask yourself this question: would the BBC ever hold a Private Health Day!

Put to one side how preposterous it was that two Labour stooges became Director General and Chairman, that the outgoing John Birt walked out of the Corporation straight into a post at No 10 and that the ex-head of the BBC's Political Unit helped write Labour's Election Manifesto.

Even if you like, ignore the fact that the BBC has, until recently, been institutionally anti-Tory.

The sorry fact is that there is not a single Labour scandal – Ecclestone, Mittal,

Mandelson and the Hindujas, Cheriegate, Tessa Jowell and Prescott and Anshutz – on
which the BBC has shown the slightest journalistic alacrity and has not had to be
dragged into covering late in the day by papers like the Mail.

Such pusillaminity is especially shameful when you compare this to the almost indecent zeal with which the BBC pursued Tory scandals. How telling that it virtually ignored the Deputy Prime Minister's affair with his secretary – a blatant abuse of his office – yet could hardly contain itself over the news that John Major had had an affair with Edwina Currie.

I recently had lunch with the BBC's Director General and I don't think it's breaking a confidence to reveal that he told me that their research showed that the BBC was no longer perceived as being anti-Tory.

"That's because you've broken the buggers", I said laughing.

And it's true. Today's Tories are obsessed by the BBC. They saw what its attack dogs did to Hague, Duncan-Smith and Howard.

Cameron's cuddly blend of eco-politics and work-life balance, his embrace of Polly

Toynbee – a columnist who loathes everything Conservatism stands for but is a

totemic figure to the BBC – his sidelining of Thatcherism and his banishing of all talk

of lower taxes, lower immigration and Euro scepticism, are all part of the Tories'

blood sacrifice to the BBC God.

Now, I'm not really worried about this. The Conservatives can look after themselves. What really disturbs me is that the BBC is, in every corpuscle of its corporate body, against the values of conservatism, with a small "c", which, I would argue, just happen to be the values held by millions of Britons.

Thus it exercises a kind of "cultural Marxism" in which it tries to undermine that conservative society by turning all its values on their heads.

Of course, there is the odd dissenting voice, but by and large BBC journalism starts from the premise of leftwing ideology: it is hostile to conservatism and the traditional Right, Britain's past and British values, America, Ulster Unionism, Euro-scepticism, capitalism and big business, the countryside, Christianity, and family values.

Conversely it is sympathetic to Labour, European Federalism, the State and State spending, mass immigration, minority rights, multiculturalism, alternative lifestyles, abortion and progressiveness in the education and the justice systems.

Now you may sympathise with all or some of these views. I may even sympathise with some of them. But what on earth gives the BBC the right to assume they are the *only* values of any merit.

Over Europe, for instance, the BBC has always treated anyone who doesn't share its federalism – which just happens to be the great majority of the British population - as if they were demented xenophobes. In very telling words, the ex-Cabinet Secretary Lord Wilson blamed the BBC's "institutional mindset" over Europe on a "homogenous professional recruitment base" and "a dislike for conservative ideas."

Yet again, until recently, anyone who questioned, however gently, multiculturalism or mass immigration was treated like a piece of dirt – a strategy which effectively enabled the BBC to all but close down debate on the biggest demographic change to this island in its history.

Worse, the Corporation censors the news. A distinguished journalist who had revealed that a rise in HIV figures was little to do with the indigenous population but was caused by recent African immigrants being diagnosed with the problem had his interview pulled at the last moment. He was replaced by a minister declaring that UK teenagers wearing condoms would stop the rise in HIV.

Above all the BBC is statist. To its functionaries, inured from the vulgar demands of the real world, there is no problem great or small – and this is one of the factors in Britain's soaring victim culture – that cannot be blamed on a lack of state spending and any politician daring to argue that taxes should be cut is accused of "lurching to the right".

Thus BBC journalism is presented through a left-wing prism that affects everything – the choice of stories, the way they are angled, the choice of interviewees and, most pertinently, the way those interviewees are treated.

Freedom of Information enquiries tell us, and we should be very unsurprised here, that the BBC Newsroom has more copies of the statist Guardian delivered than any other paper and that 90% of the Corporation's job ads are placed with that paper.

Thus are the values of a subsidised newspaper that sells 380,000 copies embraced by an organisation that reaches into virtually every home in Britain.

Like The Guardian's, the BBC's journalists, insulated from real competition, believe that only their world view constitutes moderate, sensible and decent opinion. Any dissenting views – particularly those held by popular papers – are therefore considered, by definition, to be extreme and morally beyond the pale.

Socially the BBC is snobbish. It is disdainful, in particular, of the values of the decent lower middle classes as they strive to raise their families, respect the traditions of this country, obey the law and get by on their comparatively meagre incomes.

But then, the BBC is consumed by the kind of political correctness that is actually patronisingly contemptuous of what it describes as ordinary people. Having started as an admirable philosophy of tolerance, that political correctness has become an intolerant creed enabling a self-appointed elite to impose its minority values on the great majority. Anything popular is dismissed as being populist which is sneering shorthand for being of the lowest possible taste.

The right to disagree was axiomatic to classical liberalism, but the BBC's political correctness is, in fact, an ideology of rigid self-righteousness in which those who do not conform are ignored, silenced, or villified as sexist, racist, fascist, or judgmental. Thus, with this assault on reason, are whole areas of legitimate debate – in education, health, race relations and law and order- shut down.

"Four legs good, two legs bad" chanted the sheep in Orwell's Animal Farm - that study in totalitarianism – and what is in front of one's nose is that the BBC, which glories in being open-minded, is, in fact, a closed thought system operating a kind of Orwellian Newspeak.

This, I would argue, is perverting political discourse and disenfranchising countless millions who don't subscribe to the BBC's world view. Told repeatedly that their opinions are not considered respectable or legitimate these people are disconnecting – one of the reasons, I would suggest, for the current apathy over politics.

How instructive to compare all this with what is happening in America. There, the liberal smugness of a terminally worthy, monopolistic press has, together with deregulation, triggered both the explosive growth of right-wing radio broadcasting that now dominates the airwaves and the extraordinary rise of Murdoch's rightwing Fox TV News service.

In Britain, regulators would not currently allow such "opinionated" broadcasting - though, of course, there's nothing more opinionated than the BBC's journalism. But democracy needs a healthy tension between Left and Right and nature abhors a vacuum. If the BBC continues skewing the political debate there will be a backlash and I predict that what has happened in America will eventually take place in Britain.

And here I wish to digress for a moment and address an issue that should deeply worry all those who believe in press freedom: Britain's judges – whose dislike of much of the media should not be underestimated – are itching to bring in a Privacy Law by the back door.

Under the Human Rights Act we are witnessing the development, at a frightening pace, of an aggressive judge-made privacy law over which Parliament has no control.

Indeed, had you told me 36 years ago that a cuckolded husband didn't have the right to speak about his wife's adultery, that a paper would be banned from referring to royal indiscretions contained in a round-robin journal distributed to scores of people and that the media cannot reveal the identity of a Labour ex-Education Minister who sends her child to private school – three issues that have come up recently on the privacy front - I would have simply disbelieved you.

Yes, there are excesses by the media and they need to be curbed - but as Northcliffe said, the power of the press is great but not as great as the power of suppress.

Add to a privacy law in which judges are to be the sole arbiters, the Data Protection Act which, in theory, makes it illegal to obtain ex-directory phone numbers, proposals to restrict access to coroners' courts, the use of anti-terrorist legislation to seize journalist's records, and the cynical undermining of the Freedom of Information Act – the one potentially counter balancing right for the media - and Hugh Cudlipp's credo of "publish and be damned" is being replaced more and more by the ethos of "don't publish unless the lawyer says you can".

Such restrictions are not conducive to producing adventurous journalism but, the judges, I fear, are all part of a movement by a liberal establishment to curb what they see as the excesses of the press. Indeed there was a recent movement, spearheaded by a philosophy don and taken up enthusiastically in the Subsidariat, to argue that the irresponsibility of Britain's media was making good governance all but impossible. What was needed was more *civic* journalism.

This argument, while being a brilliant defence of such newspapers as Pravda, profoundly misunderstands the nature of Britain's popular press.

Such papers need to be sensational, irreverent, gossipy, interested in celebrities and human relationships and, above all, brilliantly entertaining sugar coated pills if they are to attract huge circulations *and* devote considerable space to intelligent, thought-provoking journalism, analysis and comment on important issues.

Yes, in an ideal world, Britain's press should be more civic minded though, I for one, passionately believe that newspapermen – while beholden to behave responsibly - should be outsiders and not part of any process, civic or otherwise.

But we do not live in Utopia. We live in a world where, frankly, many electors are more interested in Celebrity Big Brother than in affairs of state.

And any paper that manages both to entertain and engage millions of readers with brilliantly written serious journalism on the great issues of the day is playing an important role in democracy and the judges and the Subsidariat ignore the sugarcoated pill argument at their peril.

Of course, the British press, pretty much all of it, has flaws: under the pressure of deadlines it is, regrettably, too often careless, too often insensitive and clumsy in its headlong rush for a story; it over-states and over-simplifies; it prefers the dramatic to the mundane, the sentimental to the compassionate. Above all it lives for the day and is often risibly short term in its view of things.

But I also believe passionately that the popular press has great virtues.

I have been an Editor now for 17 years and in that time turned down the editorships of The Times and The Telegraph. One reason I did so is that I glory in the *total* freedom and absence of interference the Rothermeres give their editors. Another was that I really do believe that the popular press, by connecting with millions of people, has a vital role to play in British life and *can*, as the Mail did in the case of Stephen Lawrence, make a difference.

At their best, popular papers – that are far more sensitive than politicians and opinion polls to national moods - articulate the anxieties, apprehensions and aspirations of their readers. Genuinely democratic – I mean, you try persuading people to fork out 45p for a paper on a rainy day - they give voice to millions of ordinary people who don't have a voice.

And, because they have this symbiotic, almost tactile responsiveness to their readers, such papers are often able to identify and highlight great truths - truths that are often uncomfortable to a ruling class that is increasingly dismissive of ordinary people's views.

It might sound pious to say, but with a weakened second chamber and a still-untested Opposition, popular papers are sometimes the only counter-foil to arrogant – and increasingly corrupt – politicians, hugely powerful but unaccountable quangocrats, an out-of-touch judiciary and a ruling class that too often thinks it knows how to run people's lives better than they do themselves.

Which brings me back to the BBC. It, of course, prides itself on having that civic responsibility referred to earlier. But let's pose this question: what if a civic BBC finds itself dealing with an administration that does not behave in a civic way?

An administration that manipulates news organisations and the news agenda, that packs Ministry Press Offices with its supporters, that chooses good days to bury bad news, that favours news bodies that give it positive coverage and penalises those who don't, that fabricates Health and Education figures and concocts dodgy dossiers — an administration that, in Campbell and Mandelson, thought nothing of engaging in systematic falsehood.

Is the BBC's civic journalism – too often credulously trusting, lacking scepticism, rarely proactive in the sense of breaking stories itself – up to dealing with a political class that too often set out to dissemble and to deceive?

The bitter irony, of course, is that when, for once, the BBC *was* proactive in its journalism and *did* stand up to the Labour Party by breaking a genuine story, the Corporation and its craven governors all but imploded under pressure from a rabid Campbell.

And what is interesting is that this contrasted with the ruthless support for the Iraq war that Rupert Murdoch imposed on his papers and their equally ruthless suppression of any criticism of the invasion whether it involved the Attorney General's malfeasance, virtually ignored in The Times, or Dr Kelly, all but hung drawn and quartered by The Sun.

Indeed, I would suggest that the intimacy and power-brokering between these two papers and No 10 and the question whether Mr Blair would have got away with his falsehoods and misjudgements over Iraq – indeed, whether Britain would have gone to war at all - without the support of the Murdoch empire, is a brilliant doctoral thesis for some future media studies student.

So I started with the question, does Britain still have a gloriously free and diverse media? Well, I suppose the answer is, up to a point, Lord Copper...

Yes, the BBC is, in many ways, a wonderful organisation. But the fact remains that it depends for its licence fee on the British population as a whole yet only reflects the views of a tiny metropolitan minority.

This is an abuse of the position of trust it should occupy and if it continues with its political and cultural bias then the British people will withdraw their consent and the Corporation will fall into discredit which would be a great pity.

Yes, Murdoch is *the* media genius of his age. His Wapping revolution led to a renaissance of the British press and the birth of papers that now routinely villify him, but the way he imposes his proprietorial views, and his manipulation of governments *is* worrying and what a terrible comment on the cowardice of senior British politicians that not one of them has spoken out against his 18% holding in ITV.

Yes, daily newspapers still sell a glorious 12m copies and contain much glorious journalism but too many are losing money, and an over-powerful Subsidariat, dominated by the BBC behemoth, is skewing the political debate.

And, yes, Britain still has a reasonably robust, commercially viable and democratic popular press but it is, as I've argued here, under siege as never before.

Circulations are slipping. Traditional revenues are migrating. Distribution is becoming more problematic. But the greatest threat comes from an ever-more centralising, an ever-more controlling establishment that is becoming increasingly intolerant of any form of dissent.

If we want to avoid the day when headlines and bulletins all recite the same mantra "Four Legs Good, Two Legs Bad" we should all of us, particularly those who care deeply about press freedom, be very, very vigilant...

To see what's in front of one's nose requires constant struggle.

And what's in front of one's nose is that Britain needs greater freedom, plurality and diversity in its media.