The article below was originally sent to the Guardian for its comments page. It shows how public debate on political issues is narrowed on the most influential media because of the absence of critical voices – whether the issue is the financial crisis or world conflicts such as in Israel/Palestine. New polling evidence from YouGov and the GUMG suggests that this is not at all what the public wants. The article was rejected by the Guardian on the grounds that ‘it would be read as a piece of old lefty whingeing about bias.’

But I think there is more at stake than this. There is a deep crisis of legitimacy both for politicians and broadcasters, in that many people do not feel properly represented. There is also great public confusion over issues such as the reasons for world conflict and the nature of the present economic crisis. Until recently there has been very little debate about the consequences of the free market policies which were promoted by political and economic elites. One consequence is that areas of public spending such as education and health are likely to be sacrificed in order to pay for the black holes in the banking system. As Naomi Klein has pointed out, the global budget crisis may be used as a rationale for deep cuts in social programmes. At present the Conservative Party is ahead in the polls. But do voters really understand what it would mean ‘to balance the government’s books’ and ‘reduce its debt’? There is little discussion of such issues in broadcast media or of possible alternatives. Re-structuring the ownership of the economy in favour of the mass of the population is apparently off the agenda. Nationalisation has come to mean the privatisation and selling of valuable assets, while losses are socialised. We are offered various forms of the free market discussed mostly by bankers, stockbrokers and the economic experts and politicians who have delivered the crisis. But the closure of debate will only increase public frustration and the sense that broadcasters have abandoned their duty to inform their audience.

Greg Philo
Glasgow University Media Group
30 September 2008
More News, Less Views

News is a procession of the powerful. Watch it on TV, listen to the *Today* programme and marvel at the orthodoxy of views and the lack of critical voices. When the credit crunch hit, we were given a succession of bankers, stockbrokers and even hedge-fund managers to explain and say what should be done. But these were the people who had caused the problem, thinking nothing of taking £20 billion a year in city bonuses. The solution these free market wizards agreed to, was that tax payers should stump up £50 billion (and rising) to fill up the black holes in the banking system. Where were the critical voices to say it would be a better idea to take the bonuses back?

Mainstream news has sometimes a social-democratic edge. There are complaints aired about fuel poverty and the state of inner cities. But there are precious few voices making the point that the reason why there are so many poor people is because the rich have taken the bulk of the disposable wealth. The notion that the people should own the nation’s resources is close to derided on orthodox news. When Northern Rock was nationalised, TV news showed us pictures of British Leyland and the old problem ridden car industry. Never mind that it was actually privately owned when most of the problems occurred and that company policy had been to distribute 95% of profits as dividends to shareholders, rather than to invest in new plant and machinery. This is all lost in the mists of history and what is conveyed is the vague sense that nationalisation is a “bad thing”. We showed how this affects public understanding by asking a sample of 244 young people in higher education (aged 18 – 23) about the great spate of privatizations which had taken place in the 1980s. We asked whether the industries involved had in general been profitable or unprofitable. Actually, the major ones of gas, electricity, oil and telecommunications were both profitable and major sources of revenue to the state, but nearly 60% of the sample thought that the industries had been losing money. This is especially poignant now that energy prices are being jacked up and the foreign owners of many of these companies are not interested in passing on their windfall profits to the British people. Countries such as China, Venezuela and even Russia keep key industries very firmly in state hands, but where are the critical voices in broadcasting here, who are given space to raise these arguments? They can be heard in the outer reaches, occasionally on *Question Time*, *Channel 4 News* or *Newsnight*. But is this what the population
want? At the start of the Iraq war we had the normal parade of generals and military experts, but in fact, a consistent body of opinion then and since has been completely opposed to it. We asked our sample whether people such as Noam Chomsky, John Pilger, Naomi Klein and Michael Moore should be featured routinely on the news as part of a normal range of opinion. Seventy three per cent opted for this rather than wanting them on just occasionally, as at present.

The Israeli/Palestinian conflict is another area of great imbalance in the views that are heard. Our study of the main TV news output showed that pro-Israeli speakers were featured about twice as much as Palestinians. This year BBC News covered Israel’s ‘birthday’ of 60 years since the setting up of the state. This was of course also the anniversary of what, from the Palestinian perspective, was the great disaster when they were forced from their homes and land. Israel’s superior public relations machine meant that they set the agenda on broadcast news. The Palestinians were featured, but rather less and as a sort of afterthought. As a presenter on BBC’s Today programme put it, “Today Israel is 60 years old, and all this week we have been hearing from Israelis about what it means to them”. Quite so. We commissioned YouGov to ask a sample of 2086 UK adults whether they thought that more coverage should be given to the Israeli point of view, or more to the Palestinians, or equal for both. Nearly twice as many people thought that the Palestinians should have the most as compared with the Israelis, but the bulk of the replies (72%) were that both should have the same. Only 5% of the population supported what the broadcasters have actually been doing in the main news output. Politicians and broadcasters say they are worried about a growing lack of interest in politics especially amongst the young. Our work shows there is no lack of interest in lively critical debate. The problem is that a news which largely features the views of two political parties with very similar free market policies at home, and an international agenda which follows America, does not provide this.

Greg Philo
Glasgow University Media Group
03 September 2008

Please forward to anyone interested