

## Media and the British Empire

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# Media and the British Empire

Edited by

Chandrika Kaul

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*Lawrence Ishan Anand*

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# Foreword

My 25-year career reporting for the BBC in South Asia was a history of the damage governments can do to their own cause by pursuing what they believe are methods which will guarantee them the media coverage they want. I came to believe that the power of the media does not equal the power or effectiveness of its message, and that no matter what efforts are made to drown out alternative messages they will somehow be heard.

For almost the whole of my career the electronic media in all the countries of South Asia were controlled by Ministries of Information. This was the era of the transistor revolution when cheap sets spread shortwave radio listening to the remotest corners of South Asia. Because the Government-controlled media were broadcasting propaganda, and poor and rich alike were quite able to discern this, millions and millions of listeners used to tune in to the BBC regularly for what they felt was impartial news. Whenever I asked villagers why they listened to the BBC they used to say, 'Because it gives true news, and gives it first.' Yet the BBC's voice was difficult to hear because it came crackling across the shortwave, it was difficult to find amidst all the other crackles, and it was broadcast for only comparatively short periods. Governments commanded the long and medium waves with their far superior signals, and stayed on air 24 hours a day. Their power was far greater than the BBC's.

Needless to say, the credibility of the BBC, and its consequent popularity, frustrated governments and was sometimes even seen by them as a threat to their security. On two occasions the BBC was seen as such a threat that the British Government allowed itself to be dragged into the battle of the airwaves. The BBC was in the eye of the storm during the movement against the Pakistani Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, after his controversial electoral victory in 1977. I had to sit in the press gallery of the National Gallery and listen to Bhutto launching an impassioned attack on me. Shortly after that I was summoned by the British High Commissioner to be told that the BBC's reporting was damaging British relations with Pakistan and so he thought I should leave. I replied that the BBC had been intending to give me a break, but his intervention meant that I would have to stay on for at least two more weeks. During the dreadful riots in which thousands of Sikhs were massacred after the assassination of the Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in 1984, the British High Commissioner in Delhi called in all

the British correspondents and warned them that if they didn't tone down their coverage, they would be thrown out. The riots didn't last long enough for us to put that threat to the test.

History shows us that the alternative sources of information which spring up when governments try to control its flow change as the means for disseminating information change. In my case, as I have said, it was the transistor radio which gave the BBC its extraordinary influence in South Asia. History also shows us that new media do not necessarily replace older forms of transmitting information. Britain might well have lost the First World War if it hadn't been for the army they recruited in India. The British Government realised that if damaging reports about the progress of the war were not countered, the stability of the country from which that crucial manpower was being drawn, and the loyalty of the soldiers once they were recruited, would be threatened. The Governments in Britain and in India therefore used all the most modern technologies and techniques to get their message across and to combat hostile sources of information. There was one pre-modern medium which they had particular difficulty in controlling: the rumour mill. One of the official bulletins, personally scrutinised by the Viceroy before it was carried by the news agencies, stated that 'wild rumours were still circulating in bazaars'. The bulletin admitted that in spite of the rumours' wildness every effort needed to be made to prevent 'the credulous' believing them.

When Indira Gandhi imposed a State of Emergency, censored the press and told the Director General of All India Radio that credibility didn't matter and he should just broadcast what he was told to broadcast, she forgot India's penchant for rumours. She didn't think of the little teashops all over the country where people were gathering to pour scorn on the censored newspapers and eagerly discuss the rumours in the bazaar. But when the Emergency was over and an election was declared, she discovered the power of the rumours about her slum destruction and mass sterilisation campaigns which had filled the information vacuum, the credibility gap, left by the censored press and the tightly controlled official media. After she had been trounced in the election she said to me, 'I have been defeated by rumours.' That was not the whole truth, but nor was it entirely untrue. There is another lesson for governments in Indira Gandhi's defeat. Sensitive governments realise the value of receiving as well as sending out information. Because independent sources were blocked by her own emergency regulations, Indira Gandhi was not aware of the damage the sterilisation campaign was doing to her reputation.

Many people have been convinced by Marshall McLuhan that 'the medium is the message'. But my experience as a journalist has taught me that the message does not necessarily reach its destination. The impact of rumour has shown me that when rival media put out different messages it isn't always the most powerful one that goes home. I've learnt from the failure of government-controlled media that overstated messages lead people to look for other sources of information. These and other important lessons are reinforced by history, particularly by the history of imperial Britain.

Britain's media relations with its Indian Empire and its colonies were peculiarly delicate, because in most cases imperial rule was a partnership. Britain could never have ruled India without securing Indian partners. India may have come under British rule by conquest, but there was no question of holding it by force. Keeping partners on side required a very subtle message; it had to persuade those it was addressed to that it was in their interest to be ruled by foreigners. It had to counter hostile messages without resorting to crude propaganda or coercion. That is why a study of those relations is so fascinating.

I draw encouragement from the history of media relations between Britain and the Empire. In the latter days of the Indian Empire Britain was opposed by perhaps the most effective journalist of the twentieth century: Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi. Winston Churchill and many others in Britain scorned the power of his message, thinking that the pen and the voice of one eccentric man who rejoiced in his own poverty, whose own paper the *Harijan* was not officially addressed to the opinion-makers but to the poorest of the poor, who had no voice on the radio, could not possibly compete with the media power in the Government's hands. But they learnt the hard way that the power of the media does not correspond directly to the power of the message. So for those fearful of the power of the media today which is spreading a global culture, Gandhi and the difficulties the mighty British Empire had in getting its message across give hope that the present cultural imperialism will not have it all its own way. These essays show that there will always be resistance to a message, no matter how powerful the media. My experience, and my reading of these essays, also lead me to believe that the more powerful the media the more likely it is to provoke others to send out their messages, and the most powerful media does not always win.

Mark Tully

# Notes on the Contributors

**Alain Canuel** received his PhD from the Université de Montréal for his research in international radio broadcasting. Since 1998, he has been working with the Networks of Centres of Excellence of Canada program. Until recently, he was Secretary-Treasurer for the Canadian Science and Technology Historical Association.

**Philip Cass** was born in Papua New Guinea and has worked as a journalist and academic in Australia, PNG, Fiji, the UK and the United Arab Emirates. He has a special interest in Pacific media history and is currently Acting Assistant Dean of the College of Communication and Media Sciences at Zayed University, Abu Dhabi.

**Denis Cryle** lectures in media and communication studies at the Central Queensland University in Australia. He has published extensively on print media at both regional and national levels, and is compiling a 25-year history of Rupert Murdoch's *Australian* newspaper.

**Ross Harvey** is Professor of Library and Information Management at Charles Sturt University, Australia. His publications explore aspects of New Zealand and Australian newspaper history, especially of the nineteenth century, and also the preservation of cultural heritage material in both print and digital forms.

**Deana Heath** is lecturer in South Asian and World History at Trinity College, Dublin. She has published a number of articles on colonialism and censorship, and is currently working on a book on the governmentisation of the obscene in India, Australia and Britain in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

**Chandrika Kaul** is lecturer in Modern British and Imperial History at the University of St Andrews, Scotland. Her research interests include the British press and Empire 1850–1950, the Indian press, and communications in world history. She is author of *Reporting the Raj, the British Press and India 1880–1922* (Manchester, 2003), the first detailed monograph examining the British press coverage of India. She is currently working on a history of the Empire/Commonwealth Press Union.

**John Lambert** is an Associate Professor in the Department of History at the University of South Africa, Pretoria. His research interests include a study of white, English-speaking identity in South Africa and of the interrelationship between that identity and Britishness.

**Joanna Lewis** is a lecturer in Imperial and African History at the Department of International History, London School of Economics. She is author of *Empire State Building: War and Welfare in Colonial Kenya* (Oxford, 2000).

**Su Lin Lewis** completed her MA dissertation on colonial Penang's cosmopolitan English press at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London in 2004. She has worked as a journalist and aid worker in Thailand and Indonesia, and writes occasionally for the *Times Literary Supplement*.

**John M. MacKenzie** is Professor Emeritus of Imperial History at Lancaster University, and holds honorary professorships at the Universities of Aberdeen, St Andrews and Stirling. He has been general editor of the Manchester University Press 'Studies in Imperialism' series for more than twenty years and is currently completing a book on the Scots in South Africa.

**Philip Murphy** is Reader in Imperial and Commonwealth History at the University of Reading. He is author of *Party Politics and Decolonization: The Conservative Party and British Colonial Policy in Tropical Africa 1951–1964* (Oxford, 1995), and *Alan Lennox-Boyd: A Biography* (London, 1999). He has recently finished editing the Central Africa volume in the series *British Documents on the End of Empire* (London, 2005).

**Tim Pratt** was educated at the University of Manchester. He has published on the British media and Indian affairs in the *Journal of British Studies*, and has reviewed for *Contemporary South Asia*.

**Ian St John** studied for a doctorate at Nuffield College, Oxford. He is the author of *Disraeli and the Art of Victorian Politics* (London, 2005) and has published several articles on nineteenth-century politics. He has worked with David Butler on the Nuffield Election Studies, and was assistant author to Martin Westlake on *Kinnock: The Biography* (Little, Brown, 2001). He currently teaches history at Haberdashers' Aske's School, Hertfordshire.

**Sir Mark Tully** was BBC Delhi correspondent for more than twenty years and has continued to live in India since his retirement. He has written several books on India and continues to write and broadcast about that country.

**Susan Williams** is a Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of Commonwealth Studies, University of London. Her publications include *Ladies of Influence: Women of the Elite in Interwar Britain* (Penguin, 2000) and *The People's King: The True Story of the Abdication* (Penguin, 2003). She is currently writing a book about the marriage of Seretse and Ruth Khama, and the birth of Botswana: *Colour Bar: The Triumph of Seretse Khama over British Imperialism and Apartheid South Africa for the Love of His Wife and His Nation*.

**Philip Woods** has taught history at Thames Valley University, London, since 1974. He also teaches for New York University in London and St Lawrence University. His research is on the British use of film for propaganda in India.