

The endangered documentary

BRITAIN remains one of the few countries where documentaries are still shown on mainstream television in the hours when most people are awake. But documentaries that go against the received wisdom and inform are becoming an endangered species, at the very time we need them most. That will be a tragedy; for viewers in this country are not only used to but support an eclectic range of programmes, unlike the United States where people expect television to be little more than a shopping mall with buskers. Rupert Murdoch's Fox Channel, a parody of journalism, fits this perfectly; and he wants us to have the same.

In survey after survey, when people are asked what they would like more of on television; they say documentaries. I don't believe they mean cod-documentaries about airports and estate agents. Nor do they mean a type of "current affairs" that is a platform for politicians and establishment "experts" and merely gestures at the truth, striking a specious balance between great power and its victims, between oppressors and the oppressed. They mean what James Cameron called "truth-telling journalism captured on film": documentaries that are the antithesis of news: that strip away the facades of "official truth" and rescue unpalatable facts and historical context from the memory hole to which "impartial" news has consigned them. The Indian writer Vandana Shiva had this in mind when she described, "the insurrection of subjugated knowledge" against the "dominant knowledge" of rapacious power. Had it not been for *Death on the Rock* and John Ware's *A Licence to Murder*, many of us would not have known the secret criminal role of the British state in the war in Northern Ireland.

The opponents of this kind of truly independent television journalism have never been better organised or more vocal. My last two documentaries for ITV, *Breaking the Silence* and *Palestine is Still the Issue*, were subjected to orchestrated, political, often vicious campaigns of complaint, originating mainly

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in America where neither film was shown. The Independent Television Commission investigated nevertheless, and my producer and I had to explain and justify almost every sequence, fact and source. The process took a total of six months, at the end of which the ITC concluded that both films were balanced, fair and accurate; the Palestine film was praised for “the thoroughness of its research and its integrity”. The would-be censors are not only the frenetic emailers of the American Zionist groups, but also those liberal establishment journalists in Britain who are campaigning to rescue a discredited prime minister. These tribunes have been in print lately bemoaning the media’s influence over “politics” (they mean Blair’s lies over Iraq) and demanding that journalists return to “basic values” (self-censorship). Ron Nail’s report for the BBC, a reaction to the Hutton whitewash, is part of this; BBC journalists who offend the government had better watch out.

The looking-glass aspect of all this is that the great majority of the British media, especially the BBC, dutifully channelled and echoed the government’s pre-invasion lies, instead of challenging and exposing them, as journalists in a real democracy should do. According to Charles Lewis, the former star American television journalist now running an independent investigative unit in Washington, the Center for Public Integrity, Iraq would not have been attacked had American journalists done their job and alerted the public to the fakery of Bush and Blair.

Can that be said of British journalism? Not quite; the Independent and the Daily Mirror broke ranks as did, now and then, the Guardian. But British broadcasting, the source of most people’s information, was largely embedded and supine, with honourable exceptions like ITV’s Terry Lloyd, who paid with his life. However, of all the world’s major broadcasters, according to a Media Tenor study, the BBC covered anti-war dissent less than all of them – less than even the American networks. In other words, the views of the majority of Britons were ignored. All that stuff about impartiality is, of course, stuff. The BBC, in its language, emphasis and omissions, has supported every war in memory. Post-Hutton, even its honourable exceptions are silent.

As I see it, only documentaries can make sense of the “war on terror”, of Iraq, Guantanamo Bay and the other impositions of rampant power that now touch all our lives. And yet within the industry, there is a resistance to documentaries that has a familiar echo: “They don’t rate”. As Channel Four has found, they have often rated better than certain game shows and “reality” programmes. But that is not the point. Documentaries do rate in a way that cries out for recognition.

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Death of a Nation: the Timor Conspiracy, which I made in 1994 with David Munro, was followed by phone calls from the public at the rate of 4,000 calls a minute, according to BT, and this continued well after midnight. When an updated version was shown four years later, more than 150,000 calls were registered within 25 seconds of the credits. This grew to half a million within the hour. And this was a film about a tiny country few knew existed and hardly anyone had heard of. In contrast, the producers of *Neighbours from Hell*, which went to air in the same week and whose conventional ratings were higher, received about a dozen calls.

My point is that the quality of the public's response to powerful documentaries is at least as important a measure of popularity, of public interest, as the ratings. That is also true of the political response. Consider the reaction to *The Secret Policeman*, Mark Daly's extraordinary and brave undercover expose of police racism. This does not mean that documentary makers can rest their case on the worthiness of "public service broadcasting". Viewers nowadays are not prepared to accept a paternalistic notion that harks back to Lord Reith, the BBC's founder and author of inspired forms of establishment propaganda. That endures, alongside a corporatism exemplified by the values of Murdoch, which Blair promised to uphold long before he came to power. In recently announcing "less intrusion", the government's new regulator, Ofcom, is making good on that promise. Viewers deserve better; and true documentary makers, indeed all broadcasters, have a special responsibility to fight their corner as never before.

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The ITV News Channel began a season of weekly John Pilger documentaries on July 11, at 9pm. Jonathan Cape will publish John Pilger's new book, *Tell Me No Lies: Investigative Journalism and its Triumphs*, later this year.