

The anti-people plot

By John Lloyd

Published: February 25 2005 17:04 | Last updated: February 25 2005 17:04

When, last year, the German government drew a tighter definition of the right of prominent people to privacy from intrusion by photographers and reporters, the Roman paparazzo Umberto Pizzi - heir to a tradition first canonised in Fellini's *La Dolce Vita* in 1960 - grumbled in an interview with *La Stampa* that "it's absurd and unfair because, as usual, those with money can avoid the newspapers, someone without money ends up on the front page and no one says anything".

Pizzi's self-interested complaint reveals a pervasive truth: that tabloid journalism has always been close to the class struggle. That struggle rages on lustily and everywhere, long after the death of socialism - especially in those countries where class matters a lot, such as Italy and Britain, but also in America, where it's not supposed to matter at all, but does.

A high proportion of the most ruthless tabloid editors were working class. James Gordon Bennett, among the first, who founded the *New York Herald* in 1835 and filled it with stories from the police courts, sports fields and theatre dressing rooms, was a poor boy from a Scots village. Walter Winchell, whom the writer Neal Gabler describes as "the columnist who invented modern gossip in the 1920s", grew up "poor, uneducated and Jewish, essentially an outcast". Hugh Cudlipp, who built the products of the *Mirror Group* in the 1950s into the biggest circulation papers in the world, was a poor man's son from the Welsh valleys. Iain Calder, the man who made the *US National Enquirer* into a five million-circulation weekly, breaking scandals which the elite papers felt reluctantly obliged to follow, was - like Bennett a century and a half before - a Scots village lad.

All vaunted the public and scorned the elite. Bennett said that the stuff he put in his papers had to appeal "to the great masses of the community"; Calder, in an interview with the *Yale Journal of Ethics* in 1996, said that "there are a number of elitist journalists. However, there are fewer and fewer, because the papers that these people are running are going out of business. They said, 'We don't care what people want, we are going to tell them what they want', and I think that's the most elitist form of journalism. It's stupid and it's easy."

Tabloid journalism of any kind has sometimes been leftist - the *Mirror* titles still are - but it's usually on the right. Axel Springer in Germany with the popular newspaper *Bild*, Silvio Berlusconi in Italy with Mediaset's tabloid *TV* and Rupert Murdoch in Australia, Britain and the US have all come at the public with a populist message that's getting more, not less, insistent. It's anti-establishment, and having helped to shrivel such establishments as religion, Italian family morality and the British monarchy, it now seeks enemies among rich and powerful liberals - among whom are included media figures.

This spirit now informs the world of blogs - which can also take left and right colouring, but have recently seemed more influential when on the right. Rightwing bloggers exposed CBS news anchorman Dan Rather's error in using forged documents in a broadcast story on President George W. Bush's allegedly erratic service in the Texas Air National Guard: Rather said he would retire soon afterwards. The same set recently forced the retirement of Eason Jordan, head of news at CNN, when they picked up comments he'd made, off the record, to the effect that US soldiers were deliberately targeting journalists in Iraq, an allegation from which he backed away when challenged. It's a standard theme on the US right that the "Cs" in CBS and CNN stand for "communist": two "communists" down in the space of a few months - both for making real, and important, errors - has been the occasion for rejoicing in the rightwing blogospheres.

To be sure, the Republican Senator Trent Lott was also blogged out in 2002 with remarks which seemed to regret the passing of segregation: one for the liberals. But common to all of these, and

to the self-congratulation which animates many of the several million blogs now existing in the US, is a feeling that the mainstream media - MSM in blogger-ese - have been either lazy, or have deliberately covered up the sins of their own. The MSM have become the elite, snobbish, anti-people target of choice - a targeting encouraged by the Bush administration.

It's an old division - between the earnest preachers who want to tell people what's good for them, and the pleasure lovers who like to share with people what's good. But it's taken a new form. The earnest preachers are now represented as rich, self-satisfied, in league with power - or worse, a malign power of their own, intent on pulling the wool over ordinary people's eyes.

Whether in rightwing or leftwing forms, a rage for revelation and exposure, a refusal to set boundaries between the private and public, a willingness to believe in elaborate, anti-people plots are now powerful forces, not just in the blogosphere, but in contemporary politics. These blogs break real stories - and are happy to break "off the record" rules to do it. They organise and give force to resentments, frustrations and even hatreds which find no outlet in conventional politics, and do so more with the techniques of the entertainment industry than of the news media. Virtual in their medium, their messages claim to have the force of the masses behind them.

"The truth will set you free!" was once a motto on socialist and trade union banners. It has now been taken up by the right, and it is changing the face of journalism.

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