

JUNE 12, 2003

Britain: Not quite a parallel media universe

LONDON — The people of Britain and the United States are living in parallel, yet substantively different, media universes. Bonds of language and overlaps of mass culture are obvious. But a visit to London quickly illuminates the reality that mainstream journalism is much less narrow here than in America.

One indicator of a robust press: Nearly a dozen ideologically diverse national daily papers are competing on British newsstands.

Granted, the picture isn't all rosy. Tabloids feature lurid crime headlines and include exploitive photos of bare-breasted women. Several major newspapers reflect the distorting effects of right-wing owners like Rupert Murdoch (who has succeeded in foisting the execrable Fox News on the United States). And the circulation figures of Britain's dailies show that the size of press runs is inversely proportional to journalistic quality, with the Sun at 3.5 million and the Daily Mail at 2.3 million – in contrast to two superb dailies, the Guardian (381,000) and the Independent (186,000).

Yet the impacts of the Guardian and the Independent, along with the Observer on Sunday, are much greater than their circulations might suggest. They're unabashed progressive newspapers that combine often-exemplary journalism with a willingness to take on the powers that be. Those papers function with vitality in news reporting – and left-oriented political commentary – that cannot be consistently found in a single U.S. daily newspaper. Overall, in British newsprint, the spectrum of thought ranges so wide that a progressive-minded American might be tempted to take up residence here.

In comparison, the leading "liberal" dailies across the Atlantic – the New York Times and the Washington Post – are mouthpieces of corporate power and U.S. empire. If the Times and the Post were being published in London, then British readers would consider those newspapers to be centrist or even conservative.

The airwaves are also very different. The British Broadcasting Corp. has been faulted by some media critics for filtering out anti-war voices during the invasion of Iraq in early spring. But the baseline of the BBC's usual reportage compares very favorably to what's on U.S. networks, including such public TV and radio mainstays as PBS and NPR.

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The BBC is audibly far more interested in a wide range of information, ideas and debate. Its director general, Greg Dyke, was on the mark when he commented several weeks ago: "Compared to the United States, we see impartiality as giving a range of views, including those critical of our own government's position." He'd recently visited the United States and was "amazed by how many people just came up to me and said they were following the war on the BBC because they no longer trusted the American electronic news media."

Dyke commented: "Personally, I was shocked while in the United States by how unquestioning the broadcast news media was during this war." And he added: "For the health of our democracy, it's vital we don't follow the path of many American networks."

Arriving in London early this month, I was immediately struck by the difference in Britain's political atmosphere. Many politicians, reporters and commentators were putting the heat on Tony Blair, spotlighting the weighty new evidence that he'd lied to the public with his adamant claims about weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. He is clearly in big political trouble – unlike George W. Bush.

Back home in the USA, while several syndicated columnists at major newspapers have been raking Bush over the coals on this issue, no one can accurately claim that Bush is on the political ropes. A key factor is that few Democrats on Capitol Hill are willing to go for the political jugular against this deceitful president. But Blair's troubles and Bush's Teflon owe a lot to the different media environments of the two countries.

A variety of British outlets are vehemently refusing to let Blair off the hook. This is the result of a gradual and constructive shift in British media culture over the past quarter century. Deference to the prime minister has evolved into properly aggressive reporting. With journalists asking tough questions and demanding better answers, Blair now faces some rough treatment — in print and on the airwaves.

The willingness of news media to challenge leaders is a vital sign of democracy. But overall, in the United States, the pulse is weak. ■