

Have I got news for you?

Andrew Blackmore

1995

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SUNDAY MAY 13th saw the first national conference of anti-water charge campaigns from all around the country. In Dublin a majority of eligible householders are ignoring the law and refusing to pay. Similar figures are available elsewhere. Yet this conference received only one and a half column inches in the Irish Times, and no mention in any other paper.

Meanwhile the Finance Minister, Ruairi Quinn, was bringing in a new law which will require accountants to report any of their clients who they discover are breaking the law by trying to cheat on tax. The accountants protested by holding meetings and issuing press statements. Their side was covered in all sections of the media: radio, newspapers and television. Special TV programmes were made about them, and they even had an accountant on Questions & Answers to plead their case.

Biased reporting

This is a good example of the way reporting is carried out. TV, radio and newspapers publish very bland accounts of what is going on. They may make a big deal, and give us all a laugh, out of the so-called sexual scandals of the British Tory party. We also see a lot of articles criticising working class people such as “dole spongers” or people claiming “too much” on their insurance. But serious investigative journalism is usually avoided when it comes to business or politics. In general, the mass media is pro-business and pro-state.

It is not a conspiracy

This is not a conspiracy theory. We do not believe there is a secret force controlling mainstream media reporting, intent on bending the truth one way or another. There are very good reasons why the media is as it is.

It costs a fortune own a newspaper or TV company. Anybody who does so, like Tony O’Reilly, Rupert Murdoch or Conrad Black, is a millionaire. Media moguls are in the same league as the rest of the rich. They hang pout in the same clubs, they buy racehorses from each other and, more importantly, they have similar economic interests.

They all want a stable economy, friendly to capitalists like themselves. They support each other in trying to lower their employees’ wages and breaking strikes. They all want to see lower public spending on services like health, and more tax breaks for the rich. While it is true that they compete with each other for audiences and advertising, it is also true that they have far more in common with each other than with the rest of us.

Power of advertising

There is a more direct link that connects the ruling class with media coverage. That is advertising and shareholding. Most papers and broadcasting stations depend on advertising to stay afloat. It costs thousands of pounds to put even a short advert. on TV or in a national newspaper. That is why most of it comes from multinationals, banks, insurance firms, etc.

If one newspaper published articles slagging off the Bank of Ireland, they would soon find the bank refusing to buy advertising space from them. There are only so many big advertisers.

If a media outlet was to lose this advertising to a competitor they would quickly find themselves in trouble. Profits would fall, and the shareholders would threaten to pull out. So no media company will be in hurry to publish controversial news about a company that advertises with them. Likewise, they are most unlikely to publish anything controversial about people who own shares in their firm.

The process can be more subtle, harder to pinpoint. Most media are dependent on advertising to be profitable, and advertisers target certain groups in their campaigns (e.g. people with high incomes). The paper or TV station, then, will also have to target these groups if it is to attract advertising, which further narrows the range of opinions they are likely to broadcast.

These factors help to ensure that little of a controversial nature gets into the mainstream propaganda networks. It makes simple economic sense. That is why a massive, if passive, revolt can take place in the suburbs of Ireland and the media are not interested. And that is why it takes amateurs putting in voluntary time and energy to publish alternative news and ideas.

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