At work among the rich

PHILIP BERESFORD, veteran reporter responsible for the Sunday Times Rich List, told LFB’s November branch meeting that the annual feature was feeding a popular “obsession with the rich”.

When he started doing the list 26 years ago, “nobody knew about the rich or who they were. Now every time a multi-millionaire sneezes it’s in the press. We are obsessed by them and our society is more unequal than it has ever been.”

Philip first started trying to do a list of the richest people in Britain in the 1980s as a junior Sunday Telegraph reporter. “I made a list of about 220 people and started to phone them up. One was Robert Maxwell who said, ‘put me down for a billion’. Another was the Duke of Devonshire – when I told him what we were doing he said he would have to have a word with the proprietor, Lord Hartwell. He did, and the paper dropped it.”

“So I went to the Sunday Times and started doing it for them. The first was in 1989. Some people did complain. Murdoch told them to fuck off – but the Sunday Times didn’t have the Telegraph’s inhibition. The left complained as well; Socialist Worker said I was a lickspittle of Wall Street and the City of London.”

Philip said the rich list was “one of the few areas where the super-rich can be held to account”. In Britain wealth definitely leads to political influence. It is right in a democratic society that we should know who owns the means of production.

To be seriously rich, said Philip, requires about £20 million of assets outside housing; there are about 20,000 people in this category. How do we know who they are? “We read, read and read. I subscribe to lots of magazines and the Companies House database. I keep an eye on company accounts.

“Some people on the list co-operate… one bought me lunch to give me a copy of his tax returns. People want to be in it. “After 26 rich lists I would say we are about 25 per cent of the way there. About another 25 per cent, we have nothing on them; and another 25 per cent are completely hidden. So there is a long way to go. Some should not really be on the list because they owe so much they should be on a poor list.

“I would love to do a ‘secret rich list’, of people I know are rich but can’t prove it.”

Why was Rupert Murdoch – super-rich owner of the Sunday Times – never in the list? Philip replied that he does not qualify because he is a US citizen. “Every year we are asked this and every year… we add a note saying that if he was eligible he would be at number N. In any case he is in the Forbes list in the USA.”

Next year’s list, the 27th, will be the last – at least with Philip’s participation. But there will be others, perhaps as an online listicle. “The media love lists”, he said.

Philip Beresford
photo © Hazel Dunlop

Trans-Pacific treaty may be bellwether

THE LEAKED text that purports to be the “Intelectual Property” chapter of the “Trans-Pacific Partnership” trade agreement contains a couple of interesting pointers to the way that the US – certainly still the dominant “partner” – sees copyright and authors’ rights developing.

One worrying feature is the provision that:

Article QQ.G.9: Each Party shall provide that for copyright and related rights, any person acquiring or holding any economic right in a work, [performance,] or phonogram:

a) may freely and separately transfer that right by contract; and

b) by virtue of a contract, including contracts of employment under-derlying the creation of works, [performances,] and phonograms, shall be able to exercise that right in that person’s own name and enjoy fully the benefits derived from that right.

In something closer to English, that appears to be imposing on any countries that sign up to the deal the basis of copyright law – that you can “assign” your work to another, who becomes its author (or indeed performer). On this interpretation, this clause would overturn the basis of the “authors’ rights” law that applies in all the other states negotiating the proposed treaty.

But it may be that there’s enough leeway here to allow this basis – that authors’ rights are inalienable works can only be used with permission of the author or performer licensing them – to be maintained in name.

On the bright side, the draft Article QQ.G.13: sets out an apparently workable process for protecting the “rights management information” attached to a work from untoward deletion or falsification. It’s fairly clear (as these things go) but too long to quote here.

As soon as it was released a group calling itself Fight for the Future popped up to say that the draft treaty “poses a grave threat to global freedom of expression” – a claim likely to get media professionals’ attention. The group justified this with reference to measures co-ordinating routes to legal action against violations of copyright and authors’ rights, with provisions for demanding information from violators and suppressing dissemination of works through reporting of court cases. As the Freelance see it, these are standard provisions to investigate industrial-scale copyright infringement: the text leaves creators’ situation dealing with “retail” infringement pretty much untouched.

The group’s agenda is revealed by the very general claim that the treaty threatens “basic access to things like medicine and information” – presumably because it doesn’t abolish copyright and patent in the internet of internet companies and against the interest of pharmaceutical companies. We’re now wondering who funds the bodies that fund Fight for the Future.

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All you need to know to start

The NUJ is holding event for young and student members on “All you need to know to launch a career in the media industry”. It will include sessions on making contacts, pitching ideas, getting paid properly and on raising your social media professional profile. Speakers include LFB’s own Twitter supremo Janet Awe; “Getting Started as a Freelance” course co-tutor Louise Bolotin; Guardian production editor and smartphone cameraperson Bill Shepherd; Guardian Women in Leadership editor Harriet Minter; The Memo editor-in-chief Alex Wood; and NUJ General Secretary Michelle Stanisstreet. It’s on Saturday 30 January at the UCL School of Pharmacy, 29-39 Brunswick Square, London WC1N 1AX and kicks off at 10:30. Details: www.nuj.org.uk/events/all-you-need-to-know-to-launch-a-career-in-the-media-industry