

The mass media and political communication

Bill Jones

“I am absolved of responsibility. We journalists don't have to step on roaches. All we have to do is turn on the light and watch the critters scuttle”

P.J. O'Rourke (1992: 4), on the duties of journalists in relation to politics

Learning objectives

- To explain the workings of the media: press and broadcasting.
- To encourage an understanding of how the media interact and influence voting, elections and the rest of the political system.
- To discuss how the pluralist and Marxist dominance theories seek to explain how the media operate and influence society.



Without newspapers, radio and pre-eminently television – not to mention more recently the internet and social media like Twitter – the present political system could not work. The media are so all-pervasive that we are often unaware of the addictive hold they exert over our attentions and the messages they implant in our consciousness on a whole range of matters of which politics is but one. This chapter examines the impact of the mass media upon the workings of our political system, together with some different theories about how they operate in practice.

The mass media

The term 'mass media' embraces books, pamphlets and film but is usually understood to refer to newspapers, radio and television. This is not to say that films, theatre, art and books are not included, but perhaps the influence of the latter three media are usually less instant and more long term. For example, the novels of Dickens did not cause instant change but did help create the climate in which change eventually took place. Since the 1950s television has eclipsed newspapers and radio as the key medium. That statement has to be qualified, however, as the internet and Web-carried social media are increasingly important in political communication. These are not as important as television currently, but following Trump's 2016 victory, it's clear the gap is closing.

Surveys indicate that three-quarters of people identify television as the most important single source of information about politics. On average British people watch over 20 hours of television per week, and given that 20 per cent of television output covers news and current affairs, a fair political content is being imbibed. Surveys used regularly to show that over 70 per cent of viewers trust television news as fair and accurate, while only one-third trusted newspapers. This degree of trust in television, however, was gravely shaken by a number of scandals in 2010–2.

Public trust in mass media

A YouGov survey in November 2012 on trust in the media showed television still the most trusted medium but not to the same extent as before:

- 64% of UK adults saw TV as the most trusted media outlet.
- 58% said the same about radio.
- 38% trusted newspapers, while 25% thought the same about magazines.
- Interestingly, websites saw a high level of trust (55%).
- But blogs are trusted by under one in ten people (9%).
- Facebook and Twitter are trusted by only 15% of UK people as a place to get trusted media content, despite their huge numbers of users (Thompson 2011).

The 2017 Edelman Trust Index, which measures changes in worldwide trust in key institutions, discerned a decline in trust comparable to 'the second and third waves of a tsunami after the financial crisis of 2008. . . Trust in the media plunged from 51% to 43%, an all time low for the index' (Nicolaou and Giles 2017).

From the spoken to the written (and then broadcast) word

Television is now such a dominant medium that it is easy to forget that its provenance has been relatively recent. During the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, political communication was mainly verbal: between members of the relatively small political elite, within a broader public at election times, within political groups such as the seventeenth-century Diggers and Levellers and occasionally from the pulpit. Given their expense and scarcity at the time, books, pamphlets and broadsheets had a limited, although important, role to play; they played a part during the Civil War (1640–9), and at the end of the eighteenth century, pamphlets were very important in disseminating radical, not to say revolutionary, ideas.

The Industrial Revolution drew workers in from the land into crowded urban spaces where they, arguably, enjoyed a higher standard of living but were scarcely so contented they were not receptive to reformers and traveling speakers, like the Wiltshire farmer Harry 'Orator' Hunt. He delivered inspiring speeches on parliamentary reform in London and elsewhere including St Peter's Fields in Manchester in August 1819, where the crowd was charged by mounted troops in the 'Peterloo Massacre' resulting in 15 dead and 650 injured. The Chartists pursuing similar objectives attracted big audiences and also, like the Anti-Corn Law League, disseminated pamphlets via the new postal system.

Next in the chronology of development came the inception of mass circulation newspapers – *The Times*, *The Telegraph*, *Daily Mail*, the *Daily Express* and the *Daily Mirror* – which provided information on current affairs for the newly enfranchised masses. The press barons – Northcliffe, Beaverbrook and Rothermere – were courted by politicians for the influence they were believed to wield; in consequence, they were showered with honours and often given government jobs to further enhance their invariably enormous egos. Table 9.1 provides recent circulation figures for the national dailies.

The print press

By tradition the British press has been pro-Conservative. In 1945 the 6.7 million readers of Conservative-supporting papers outnumbered the 4.4 million who read Labour papers. During the 1970s, the tabloid *The Sun*, increased the rightwards imbalance, and by the 1992 election, the Labour-supporting press numbered only *The Guardian* and the *Daily Mirror*, with the vast majority of dailies and Sundays supporting the government party: 9.7 million to 3.3 million. Major's Government however, at the fag-end of the Conservatives' 18 years in power, saw its 'brand' deteriorate markedly. Ejection

from the ERM in 1992, endless squabbles with the rebellious Euro-sceptics and a deluge of sleaze saw to it that the press began to realign behind Labour's charismatic new leader, Tony Blair. In 1995 *The Sun* caused a sensation by deciding to desert Major and back Blair. It should be noted that by this time a large proportion of the reading public had decided to change sides and it could be argued that editors were merely making a commercial judgment in changing sides too (see Table 9.1). These days many people, especially students, view newspapers online: Table 9.2 shows the impressive degree of traffic – especially to the *Daily Mail* and *The Guardian* – attracted by titles in 2016.

Table 9.1 National newspaper print circulations June 2016 (ABC figures)

Title	Avg circulation	Month on month percentage change	Year on year % change
<i>The Sun</i>	1,755,331	2.25	-3.5
<i>Daily Mail</i>	1,548,349	0.28	-4.83
<i>The Sun on Sunday</i>	1,479,144	1.97	0.87
<i>The Mail on Sunday</i>	1,361,228	0.75	-5.08
<i>Metro</i> (free)	1,348,127	0.17	0.21
<i>London Evening Standard</i> (free)	910,033	0.78	2.54
<i>The Sunday Times</i>	806,375	3.67	5.47
<i>Daily Mirror</i>	770,714	-1.02	-9.96
<i>Sunday Mirror</i>	696,504	-1.61	-14.62
<i>Daily Star</i>	513,452	0.91	23.31
<i>The Daily Telegraph</i>	496,286	1.12	1.34
<i>The Times</i>	449,151	2.51	15.34
<i>Daily Express</i>	421,057	1.45	-2.66
<i>The Sunday Telegraph</i>	382,898	3.23	2.21
<i>Sunday Express</i>	372,247	2.75	-1.13
<i>Daily Star - Sunday</i>	336,618	4.92	30.54
<i>i</i>	294,223	2.97	7.16
<i>Sunday People</i>	273,029	1.06	-13.69
<i>The Observer</i>	205,007	8.42	8.31
<i>Financial Times</i>	199,359	0.49	-6.95
<i>Sunday Mail</i>	177,277	-5.52	-14.64
<i>The Guardian</i>	171,723	3.63	0.29
<i>Daily Record</i>	167,865	-2.8	-12.13
<i>Sunday Post</i>	151,861	-2.07	-20.55
<i>City AM</i> (free)	97,658	0.4	-10.37

Source: Ponsford (2016)

Table 9.2 Newspaper website ABC figures for June 2016

Title	Daily average unique browsers	Month on month % change	Year on year % change
Mail Online	15,053,614	7.88	10.4
theguardian.com	10,304,181	15.48	32.59
Trinity Mirror Group - Digital	7,170,167	6.43	17.89
The Telegraph	5,623,053	29.49	37.22
Mirror Group Nationals	5,032,799	8.38	18
The Independent	4,382,722	43.77	71.76
The Sun	2,730,920	15.37	
Express.co.uk	1,851,337	18.69	80.09
Metro	1,346,565	11.49	-11.61
dailystar.co.uk	818,188	-9.02	6.38
Manchester Evening News	747,713	5.01	30.41
Evening Standard	725,888	34.45	49.5
Liverpool Echo	524,549	-10.28	12.14
Wales Online	392,220	36.87	49.96
Birmingham Mail	239,863	16.05	12.66
Chronicle Live	237,111	-8.33	8.6

Source: Ponsford (2016)

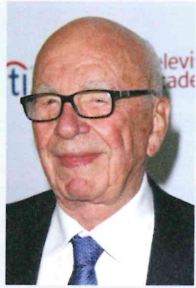
Quality press and the tabloids

All the instincts of the working class are Tory: on race, patriotism, you name it. It's just that they happen to vote Labour. Murdoch understands that which is why the Sun has been so successful.

(Lord Bernard Donoghue, quoted in Mullin (2009:397–8))

Anyone can see the UK press has 'quality' newspapers like *The Times*, *The Telegraph*, *The Guardian*, *Financial Times* and *The Independent*, with their Sunday extensions; the 'mid-tabloids' like the *Mail* and *Express*; and the tabloids like *The Sun*, *Mirror* and *Star*. Each type of product is aimed at and caters for a particular demographic: educated middle class, lower middle class and working class respectively.

PROFILE

Rupert Murdoch
(1931–)

Australian media magnate. Educated at Oxford, where briefly he was a Marxist. Learned newspaper business in Australia but soon acquired papers in Britain, most famously *The Sun*, the *News of the World*, *The Times* and *The Sunday Times*. His company, News International, also owns Sky TV, and he owns broadcasting outlets all over the world, including China. Blair and Murdoch seemed to get on well with the latter regularly calling to visit the man he helped elect in 1997. Even during the war in Iraq *The Sun* remained solidly behind Blair. Murdoch's career and reputation took a big blow when his *News of the World* title was shown to have used phone hacking to acquire stories. Despite a close to 3 million a week circulation, the title was discontinued.

Decline of newspaper readership

Sunday paper sales declined from 17 million to 15 million in the period 1990–8, while dailies declined from 15 million to 13 million. Britain is still a nation addicted to newspapers, but the habit is declining. The reasons for this are connected with the preference of the young to read newspapers, if at all, free online and their tendency not to acquire the habit of reading a daily newspaper; the competition for the nation's attention in the form of sport, computer games, celebrity gossip and social networks; and the increasing cost of newspapers, with the 'qualities' now costing well over a pound per copy. Daily newspapers, with few exceptions, have lost readership at a rate of 2–3 per cent per year according to the OECD report of June 2010. In November 2011 the 11 daily newspapers sold an average of 8.89 million per day, including the surprisingly successful *Independent's* spin-off, the minimalist *i*; this figure represented a 6.7 per cent decline on the previous year. The rate of decline is therefore accelerating. However, the free morning paper, *Metro*, increased its circulation across the country by 2.42 per cent and 4.42 per cent in London.

Tabloids

The declining market helps explain the razor-sharp competition among tabloids. Experience suggests that 'sleaze' stories sell papers, leading to invasions of privacy and associated

controversy. The explosion of a national obsession with celebrity has also heavily influenced tabloid content, with the *Sun* becoming more like a celeb gossip magazine than a traditional newspaper. The 'qualities' affect to disapprove of such stories but gleefully join in once these stories have, in their opinion, entered the mainstream.

However, there is more to tabloids politically than lightweight stories; they sell by the millions, and even if a vote is bought through blackening a politician's name, it counts as much as any other on election day. Media experts working for parties read the tabloids very carefully and react accordingly. The *Daily Mail* has been very successful in offering a product acceptable nationwide: Blair, Brown, Cameron (and later Theresa May) all paid close attention to its editorial positions and occasionally even wrote articles themselves for them. In elections going back to the 1980s a close correlation was noted between issues run by the Conservatives and lead stories in the tabloids; it was known that certain tabloid editors had close links with Conservative Central Office. Tony Blair had long been convinced of the political importance of the tabloids; his press secretary, Alastair Campbell, was known chiefly as a tabloid journalist, though with much political savvy. Cameron too initially chose a tabloid man for the same role – the ill-fated Andy Coulson, forced to resign in February 2011, in connection with the phone hacking scandal (see below).

Leveson Inquiry and Report 2012

By 2011 *The Guardian's* persistent reports on phone hacking by newspapers, especially the tabloid *The Sun*, were finally accepted as true, and Lord Leveson was tasked with a major inquiry into the culture, practices and ethics of the British press. His three-volume report came out November 2012 finding that phone hacking was not confined to 'one or two practitioners of the dark arts'; news stories had been pursued 'recklessly, causing devastating damage to families'; and that celebrities had been viewed as 'fair game for intrusive reporting'. The report urged a press regulator independent of both politicians and the press, supported by 'statutory underpinnings' plus a statutory obligation by government to 'protect freedom of the press'. Reaction was mixed with David Cameron, supported by most of the press, balking at the statutory element as a 'Rubicon' he felt should not be crossed in the interests of free speech.

Broadcasting

Hitler, Baldwin and Roosevelt exploited the radio successfully during the interwar years, and during the war Churchill's

The media,
entertainment and
political significance

Popular entertainment's engagement with politics matters because of how it shapes political values and images, which in turn influence perception and experience of the world.

(Street 2011: 101)

In his excellent book on the mass media, John Street (2011) argues powerfully that 'entertainment' is more than mere enjoyment. Soaps, dramas, even game shows exert a subtle, unrecognised influence on the way we interpret the world and form our political views. Evidence of its importance is gained by recalling how prohibitive autocratic governments are regarding certain kinds of art or entertainment. Communist governments tended to see certain films and pop music, even jazz, as 'subversive Western decadence'; Islamic governments tend to be the same, though for different, religious reasons. In such political systems the media are used to present a benign, caring, munificent role of the state, thereby seeking to pre-empt opposition and encourage conformity.

Street points out that the West was not immune from this; the CIA maintained a busy file on John Lennon after he arrived to live in New York (Street 2011: 93). He also argues that satire is often used in the USA to:

pit the assumptions of the commonplace against the pretensions of the politicians and their aides. Everyday common sense is offered as a counterweight to the elite being out of touch.

(Street 2011: 88–9)

Depictions of greed, hypocrisy and incompetence in satirical drama – reflecting a generally cynical analysis – are used to criticise Western political systems on behalf of the public. Soap operas might seem like routine, relaxing airtime for viewers, but Street cites studies suggesting how they play important social roles. For example, they can be the vehicles for key values – the primacy of the family, the desirability of helping neighbours and others in need, the importance of recognising the essential humanity of relative 'outsiders' like immigrants or gays (Street 2011: 95–9). He also observes how sport is used to create and reinforce national identities as well as being used by media moguls like Murdoch to establish their presence in the media marketplace. Just as the works of Charles Dickens, through highlighting the condition of the poor, prepared the emotional and ideological context in which socialism could develop, so the media perform the crucial functions of informing and fashioning our political culture. Another example of 'celebrity' and politicians

use of the radio must have been worth quite a few divisions to the war effort so inspiring did it prove. Some politicians, surprisingly including Neville Chamberlain, were adept at speaking to the cameras of Pathé News; others, equally surprisingly, like Oswald Mosley, were not. During the war, films like *In Which We Serve*, starring Noel Coward, were effective vehicles for wartime propaganda. Broadcasts of the fledgling television service were stopped during the war and were slow to restart; not so in the USA where television was quickly recruited for political service.

The clearest example was in 1952 when Richard Nixon bought 30 minutes of airtime to clear his name of financial impropriety with his (in)famous 'Checkers' broadcast. Offering himself as a hard-working, honest person of humble origins, Nixon finished his talk by telling viewers how his daughter had received a puppy as a present: he did not care what 'they say about it, we're gonna keep it!'. This blatant appeal to sentiment and his playing the 'victim' role proved spectacularly successful and confirmed Nixon's vice-presidential place on the Eisenhower ticket. Later on, television ironically contributed to Nixon's undoing through the famous televised debates with Kennedy during the 1960 presidential election contest. Despite an assured verbal performance – those listening on the radio mostly thought he had bested Kennedy – Nixon, the favourite, looked shifty with his 'five o'clock shadow' and crumpled appearance. Kennedy's good looks and strong profile gave him a clear edge. Politicians the world over looked, listened and learned that how you appear on television counts for as much as what you say (see 'Television and the Image' below).

The **British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC)** was founded in 1926 as a public corporation. John Reith, its first Director General, set a high moral tone – 'to inform, educate and entertain' – the vestiges of which can still perhaps be discerned dimly within the corporation's output. In 1955, however, the BBC's monopoly was broken when ITV came into being, followed by commercial radio in 1973.

The BBC was granted a second television channel (BBC2) in 1964; a second ITV channel (Channel 4) began broadcasting in 1982, and Channel 5 in 1997. In February 1989 Rupert Murdoch's Sky Television began broadcasting using satellite technology. After a quiet start the new technology took hold and was operating at a profit by 1993. Many of the channels offer old films and popular programme repeats from the USA, but *Sky News* established itself in the eyes of the public and politicians as a respectable and competent 24-hour news channel which stands comparison with the BBC's equivalent rolling service.

is provided by the experience of Ed Balls, former Labour Cabinet minister, who so memorably lost his seat in the 2015 general election. In 2016 he joined the contestants on BBC's *Strictly Come Dancing* and, despite his wide girth and uncertain sense of rhythm, he survived for 10 weeks on the show, through obvious commitment and his likeable personality, in the process coming close to 'National Treasure' status. 'I'd been on television so many times before but people only ever saw a politician. . . . Every day I go on the streets and someone will say "We really enjoyed you on the show, it was great to find you're a human being"' (Shipman 2017). Politicians could kill for this type of exposure, but for Balls, it came *after* he needed it and when he had exited the political world.

Television has transformed the electoral process

Since the 1950s television has become the most important media element in general elections. Unlike in the USA, political advertising is not allowed on British television, but party political broadcasts are allocated on the basis of party voting strength. These have gained in importance during elections and become increasingly sophisticated, and some can have a substantial impact on voter perceptions. More important, however, is the extensive news and current affairs coverage, and here US practice is increasingly being followed:

- 1 *Professional media managers ('spin doctors')*, such as Labour's Peter Mandelson and Alistair Campbell – have become increasingly important. Brendan Bruce, Conservative Director of Communications 1989–91, comments: 'The survival of entire governments and companies now depends on the effectiveness of these advisers yet few outside the inner circles of power even know these mercenaries exist or what their true functions are' (Bruce 1992: 128). Street observes how British politics has become 'packaged' and more like the American model with its 'large army of professionals (speech writers, pollsters, advertising executives, film makers and so on)' (Street 2011: 237).
- 2 *Political meetings* have declined. Political leaders now follow their US counterparts in planning their activities in the light of likely media coverage. The hustings – open meetings in which debates and heckling occur – have given way to stage-managed rallies to which only party members have access. Entries, exits and ecstatic applause are all meticulously planned with the all-ticket audience as willing and vocal accomplices.
- 3 *Soundbites*: Given television's requirements for short, easily packaged messages, political leaders insert pithy,

memorable passages into their daily election utterances – the so-called 'soundbite' – in the knowledge that this is what television wants and will show in their news broadcasts and summaries throughout the day.

- 4 *Party political broadcasts (PPBs)* comprise slots allocated to the parties either on the basis of their voting performance at the previous election or on the number of candidates they are fielding. The first was made by Lord Samuel for the Liberals in 1951, but they were seldom skilfully made until 1987 when film director Hugh Hudson made a film of Neil Kinnock which impressively raised his personal ratings. In 1997 Major vetoed a PPB which represented Blair as a Faust-like figure, prepared to sell his principles for electoral victory. In recent years PPBs have declined further in importance. During the 1980s they averaged nine minutes in length, but by 2005 this figure had come down to a mere two-and-a-half minutes.

Television has influenced the form of political communication

Broadcasting – especially television – has had a transforming impact on political processes. Two minutes of exposure on peak-time television enables politicians to reach more people than they could meet in a lifetime of canvassing, handshaking or addressing public meetings. Alternatively, speaking on BBC Radio 4's *Today* programme gains access weekly to an up-market audience of 12m elite opinion formers and decision makers (Margaret Thatcher always listened to it and once rang in, unsolicited, to comment). In consequence broadcasting organisations have become potent players in the political game: As for politicians, to command attention in our living rooms, they have to be relaxed, friendly, confidential – they have to talk to us as individuals rather than as members of a crowd (Queen Victoria used to complain Gladstone addressed her as if she were a public meeting and perhaps Michael Foot-Labour Leader 1981–3, addressed television audiences like that). Long speeches are out. On television, orators are obsolete. Political messages have to be compressed into spaces of two to three minutes – often less. Slogans and key phrases have become so important that speech writers are employed to think them up; the playwright Ronald Millar, for example, was thus employed and helped to produce Margaret Thatcher's memorable 'The lady's not for turning' speech at the 1981 Conservative Party Conference (available on YouTube).

Television and the image

Since the arrival of television, appearances have been crucial. Bruce (1992) quotes a study that suggested 'the impact we make on others depends on . . . how we look and behave – 55 per cent; how we speak – 38 per cent and what we say only 7 per cent. Content and form must therefore synchronise for, if they don't, form will usually dominate or undermine content' (1992: 41). So we saw Harold Wilson smoking a pipe to pre-empt what his adviser Marcia Williams felt was an overly aggressive habit of using his fist to emphasise a point. Margaret Thatcher was the first leading politician to take image building totally professionally under the tutelage of her personal media guru, (later Sir) Gordon Reece. Peter Mandelson, Labour's premier spin doctor of the 1980s and 1990s, commented (author interview, 1992) that by the mid-1980s 'every part of her had been transformed: her hair, her teeth, her nose I suspect, her eyebrows. Not a part of Mrs Thatcher was left unaltered.' Every politician now has a career reason to be vain.

Brand image

In addition politicians seek to establish an image or *brand* for their parties. A negative image can contaminate policy as the Conservatives found out after nearly a decade in opposition. Theresa May claimed Tories were seen as the 'nasty party', ungenerous, illiberal and uncaring for the poor. Consequently David Cameron, when he became leader in 2005, worked extremely hard to associate his party with liberal attitudes towards gays, the environment and the disadvantaged. Once 'rebranded' he faced an ongoing problem as prime minister trying to prevent negative images returning as he led cuts in public services and, in his 2012 budget, tax cuts for the richest 1%. I went to the CBI conference in Birmingham to hear the Prime Minister speak, and there on a giant TV screen . . . was our very own Big Brother. This Big Brother smiles a lot in a self-deprecating kind of way. He uses 'um' and 'well' as a rhetorical device, to convince us he's not reading out a prepared text, but needs to pause to work out exactly



Figure 9.1 A televised debate with party leaders

Source: STEFAN ROUSSEAU/AFP/Getty Images

what he means. There is a prepared text of course but he adds to it phrases such as 'I really think' and 'you know I really have to tell you' and 'in my view'. This is the new oratory. The old politicians told us they were right, and that there was no room for doubt, the new politician is not telling us truths, but selling us himself. . . . His message is that you should take him on trust; you should believe him because you love him.

(Simon Hoggart, 'Commons Sketch: Blair lays on the therapy for the terracotta army', *The Guardian*, 3 November 1999. © Guardian Newspapers Limited, reprinted with permission)

Television party leader debates, 2010

The most famous televised political debates were between Nixon and Kennedy in 1960, but it took another half century for Britain to copy this particular American innovation. The reason? Probably because Gordon Brown, running way behind in the polls, thought his mastery of policy detail would win the viewers over; Cameron agreed because his mastery at PMQs convinced him he could best Brown in this context too. On 15 April the first debate took place and, with 10 million people tuning in, it initially transformed the campaign. Missing the supportive noise of his own MPs, Cameron was below par; Brown was maybe a touch better than expected, but the revelation of the debate was Nick Clegg. As the leader of the third party, Clegg was a relative unknown to most voters so his bravura performance had a major impact. Setting himself apart from the two big traditional parties, he was able, helped by his youthful good looks and media confidence, to manufacture a sense of freshness and optimism regarding change for the better. Liberal Democrat poll ratings surged to over 30 per cent, transforming a two-horse race into a three-horse one.

More fluent and comfortable in the format than an unusually constipated Cameron and a stolid Gordon Brown, Clegg grabbed 'change' from the Tory and 'fairness' from Labour.

(Rawnsley 2010)

'Cleggmania' had broken out but, sadly for his followers, it was short-lived. Clegg was ferociously attacked by the Tory press and from Labour sources too; during the remaining two debates Cameron seemed to 'learn' the rules of this new game and ended up, by many judges, the overall 'winner'. On election day those heady Lib-Dem poll predictions were replaced by an actual substantially lower score of 24 per cent: respectable by previous standards, and maybe higher than if the debates had not been held, but evidence that support

won through the media can prove 'soft' and easily eroded by the political rough and tumble. However, many Conservative strategists felt Cameron's decision to debate on television was another fatal mis-judgment enabling Clegg to up his party's support beyond what it would have been without the debate – contributing to his party's failure to win an expected overall majority.

This was not a mistake Cameron, advised by his Australian election strategist Lynton Crosby, was going to make in 2010 as he steadfastly refused to debate Ed Miliband face to face, an odd decision in view of his weekly demolitions of Ed at PMQs but more evidence of how serious the 'Cleggmania' mistake was believed to have been. In May's surprise 2017 election she refused to do face-to-face debates with Corbyn, but she suffered a backlash of criticism for her alleged 'cowardice', something which struck home when her overall campaign was so lifeless and poor.

Television images: Blair v Brown

These two Labour Prime Ministers had hugely contrasting images. Blair's was chameleon to a degree; keen to appeal to everyone, he tried to be all things to all men: blokeish with demotic speech, sipping a cup of tea in photo shoots; serious when reading the lesson at important funerals; aggressive and witty at PMQs; statesmanlike if addressing the UN. On television he was a natural, able to convey relaxed good humour. He was also more than a little vain, seeking to dress 'young' in tight jeans and allegedly using fake tan from time to time.

Brown was totally different: shy in public and often dishevelled; unable to project in public the warmth or wit his friends saw in private. At PMQs he was regularly bested by the more Blair-like Cameron, and his speaking style, aggressive and incisive in Opposition, proved lacklustre and pedestrian in government. Supporters claimed he was honest – not trying



Figure 9.2 Gillian Duffy and Gordon Brown

Source: Press Association/Lewis Whyld

Personnel

Unsurprisingly, the media and politics have become more closely interrelated, with media professionals such as David Steel, Tony Benn, Bryan Gould, Austin Mitchell and Peter Mandelson going into politics, and Robert Kilroy-Silk, Brian Walden, Michael Portillo and Matthew Parris moving out of politics and into the media. The apotheosis of this tendency was represented by former US President Ronald Reagan, who used his actor's ability to speak lines perfectly to the camera to more than compensate, arguably, for other political inadequacies.

Spin doctors

New Labour is extremely relaxed about people becoming filthy rich, as long as they pay their taxes.

[The second half of this sentence is often not quoted by Mandelson's critics.]

(quoted in Malik 2012)

These potent new actors on the political stage focus their energies on ensuring that the media give the desired interpretation of events or statements (see Street 2011: Chapter 9). Their provenance is usually thought to have been during the 1980s when the *New York Times* used the term in an October 1984 article to describe smartly dressed men and women who moved among crowds at political events and sought to explain what their political boss had *really* meant to say. Since then the popular idea is of somewhat shadowy figures moving around and choreographing press conferences or on the phone to television executives cajoling and bullying to get their way. The results are usually believed to be a distortion of the truth and to have fuelled the lack of trust in the political process. Malcolm Tucker, the profane, ruthless but entirely fictional spin doctor in the satirical sitcom *The Thick of It* reflected something of this popular view.

New Labour and Spin

While other prime ministers faced world wars or major economic crises, I have faced the modern media.

(Tony Blair, quoted in Richards (2010: 195))

One student of the media quoted a senior Labour spin doctor as saying: 'Communications is not an afterthought to our policy. It's central to the whole mission of New Labour' (Barnett and Gaber 2001: 116). So, it is hardly surprising that Labour was demonised as the party that invested too much in presentation, in 'spin'. Roy Greenslade, writing in *The Guardian* on 6th June 2002, argued that it all began in response to the

to be someone he was not like Blair – and serious in order to address the serious issues of the day. All the polling evidence, however, shows Brown failed to impress, charm or win over the majority of British voters, who clearly respond to a little well-crafted wooing, even if it is at times a little obvious. Brown also lacked basic political nous, leaving a microphone on live when confiding to an aide that a loyal Labour voter, Gillian Duffy, he had just interviewed was a 'bigot'.

Broadcasters have usurped the role of certain political institutions

Local party organisation is less important now that television can gain access to people's homes so easily and effectively. However, the message is a more centralised national one, concentrating on the party leadership rather than local issues and local people. The House of Commons has lost some of its informing and educative function to the media. Ministers can prefer to give statements to the media rather than to Parliament – often on the 'Green' just outside the House – and television interviewers gain much more exclusive access to ministers than the House of Commons can ever hope for. Even public discussion and debate are now purveyed via radio and television programmes such as the BBC's *Today*, *Newsnight* and *Question Time*.

The appointment of party leaders

Clement Attlee was famously taciturn in front of the cameras, and Winston Churchill never took to it, but Harold Macmillan flirted with television, conducting a stilted 'interview' in Number 10 in the run-up to the 1959 election. From here on, elections became televisual and the ability to shine on television a qualification for the top political jobs. So, Harold Wilson was good, Ted Heath not so much so; Jim Callaghan was competent, Margaret Thatcher became so; John Major was average; Blair was brilliant. Gordon Brown tried hard but could not overcome some kind of innate shyness and lack of confidence. Jeremy Corbyn, according to most commentators, fails to come over well on television. Some say he looks too scruffy and lacks any kind of charisma. Significantly, David Cameron's 'without notes' speech at the 2005 Tory conference was the launch pad for his campaign, and as leader he proved a very good media performer as well as crushingly effective at PMQs – the aspect of the Commons most featured on news bulletins. Street argues (Street 2011: 244) that we have seen the emergence of a 'celebrity politics' in which the politicians 'mimic the style of pop stars and film stars, in an attempt to make themselves look more attractive to increasingly disillusioned voters and media' (ibid.: 236).

way Neil Kinnock was treated by the right-wing press during the 1980s, attacked as a 'windbag', weak and incompetent. *The Sun*, *Daily Mail* and *Daily Express* pulled no punches and built up their coverage – much of it based on no evidence – throughout the decade. Leading up to the 1992 election, *The Sun's* editor, Kelvin MacKenzie, went to town two days before polling day, devoting nine pages to its 'Nightmare on Kinnock Street' feature. 'It's *The Sun* wot won it' was the gloatingly triumphant headline following the result.

Maybe the reaction of Mandelson and his colleagues to this onslaught is understandable. Together with Alastair Campbell, Blair's press secretary, he insisted slurs were rebutted and retractions given. The right-wing media soon discovered they were being matched, and criticisms of 'New Labour spin' became commonplace. Unfortunately this aggressive media policy continued into government, and what had been an asset rapidly became a liability as voters began to doubt the veracity of government statements and statistics.

'Spin is still everywhere', wrote Sir Bernard Ingham, Thatcher's own fearsome spin doctor, in *The Sunday Times* (16th March 2003), 'and because of spin, Blair has forfeited the trust of the nation and . . . parliament.' Opinion polls gauging public trust in Blair certainly reinforced such a judgment, and some even attributed the shockingly low turnout in the 2001 election to a collapse of voter belief in what the government was saying.

It would be foolish to accuse New Labour of inventing spin; even before the advent of mass media, governments sought

PROFILE

Alastair Campbell (1957–)

Tony Blair's press secretary. Educated at Cambridge; had a career in tabloid journalism before joining Blair's personal staff. Often referred to as the 'real Deputy Prime Minister', he had constant access to his boss, and his words were held to carry the authority of the PM. He was well known to journalists, and he used charm and threats to get his own way. In 2003 he was incensed when accused via a BBC interview of 'sexing up' the intelligence dossier used to justify the decision to go to war in Iraq. He was exonerated eventually, but the ensuing media furor – during which he was accused of vindictiveness against the BBC – proved to be his swansong as he stepped down in the autumn of that year, still defiant and largely contemptuous of the nation's media.



to offer the best possible interpretations of their actions. Yet Campbell acquired too high a profile as the demonic 'spin doctor' and even featured as the subject of a televised profile initiative to combat Conservative policy statements. After Blair too once asked in a leaked memo for 'more eye-catching initiatives' to combat Conservative policy statements. After the non-discovery of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, after Blair had cited them as the justification for invasion in 2003, the damaging association of New Labour with 'spin' was compounded.

PROFILE

Peter Osborne's critique of 'manipulative populism'

The well-known columnist, author and broadcaster, Peter Osborne (1957–), wrote a swingeing attack on the 'supplanting of parliamentary democracy . . . a regime of media hype, spin doctors and skullduggery' in *The Triumph of the Political Class* (2007: 5). He recalls that Stanley Baldwin and Clement Attlee were Prime Ministers who worked through their ministers – who are the people who actually wield the legal power of government – and Parliament. It followed that the Chief Whip was the person on whom the PM relied most heavily for support in his political battles.

Osborne (2007: 53) recalls Brown's promise to:

bring back cabinet government, respect civil service impartiality, restore the primacy of parliament and to abandon the dark political arts at which the team of political assassins around Blair had so excelled.

However, Brown did none of these things, and Cameron's ill-fated appointment of Andy Coulson – former editor of the *News of the World* – did not at the time suggest that a new regime was to enter Downing Street. Osborne also explains that the elevation of Campbell and Coulson was due not necessarily to mere media strategies, but to the new nature of the media. It is now so all-encompassing, such a constant and demanding presence, that it has become the instrument of a new kind of politics. Parliament is supposed to be the body which ultimately determines policy and decisions but the media is now so powerful it can apply a range of influences: certainly delays, sometimes vetoes as well as urge courses of action. Osborne cites the vivid phrase coined by Anthony Barnett to describe this new way in which we are governed: 'manipulative populism.'

Tabloidisation of television

Studies have shown the reduction of peak time current affairs television since the 1980s and some have argued there has been a progressive 'dumbing down' of the medium. Possible explanations for this, offered by Leach et al. (2006: 164–5), are that: television competition has taken its cue from print journalism's 'race to the bottom'; newspapers are chasing younger readers and hope the snappy, abbreviated style, peppered with celebrity items will prove attractive to this demographic; and Rupert Murdoch's influence of the mass media – for example, when Elvis Presley died *The Times* did not cover the funeral in 1977 as it was deemed inappropriate, but after Murdoch took over in 1981 two journalists were sent to cover Bob Marley's last rites. Finally, increased competition from satellite and cable plus internet-carried material has forced older media to adopt more populist policies.

The phone-hacking scandal, 2011–2

The Leveson inquiry into the ethics and practices of the press occasioned by the phone-hacking scandal was set up by David Cameron in July 2011. However, the story began in 2005 when *News of the World* journalists 'hacked' into the mobile phones of members of the royal family in pursuit of stories; royal editor Clive Goodman and his colleague Glen Mulcaire pleaded guilty to these crimes; they were imprisoned for four and six months respectively. The editor of the Sunday tabloid denied any knowledge of their 'rogue' behaviour, repeating his denials in front of a Commons' Select committee. However, the mutterings that such ignorance was not believable in any conscientious editor did not cease and the painstaking Nick Davies of *The Guardian* eventually unearthed evidence proving that royal phone hackings were not isolated offences and that senior staff must have known about it.

In the summer of 2011 the senior staff of News International (NI) appeared before the Media and Culture Committee where their main defence was, again, that they knew nothing about such murky matters, despite the fact that, in the light of emerging evidence, it was an explanation almost impossible to sustain. NI could no longer deny that phone hacking had been a widespread practice within the Sunday tabloid; it closed the *News of the World* on 7th July and in February 2011 launched as replacement, *The Sun on Sunday*. By then a major inquiry into press ethics and practices under Justice Leveson had been set up and its hearings attracted considerable publicity. In March 2012, Deputy Assistant Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police, Sue Ackers, astonished the inquiry by describing a 'culture of illegal payments at the *Sun*' to officials in 'all areas of public life' (Home News 2012).

The media and pressure groups

Just as individual politicians influence the media and seek their platforms to convey their messages, so do pressure groups as they seek to influence government policy. Pressure group campaigners such as gay rights campaigner Peter Tatchell and Tony Juniper, formerly leader of Friends of the Earth, are expert and knowledgeable about massaging the form in which the press and television like to receive stories. Because it has been so successful, much pressure group activity now revolves around the use of the media. For example, anti-blood-sports campaigners use yellow smoke when trying to disrupt hunting events as they know television responds well to it.

The mass media and voting behaviour

Jay Blumler et al.'s (1978) judgment that 'modern election campaigns have to a considerable extent become fully and truly television campaigns', was probably a decade late. But what impact do the mass media have on the way in which citizens cast their votes? Does the form that different media give to political messages make any major difference? Substantial research on this topic has been undertaken, although with little definite outcome. One school of thought favours the view that the media do very little to influence voting directly but merely reinforce existing preferences.

Blumler and McQuail (1967) argued that people do not blandly receive and react to political media messages, but instead apply a filter effect. Denver (1992: 99) summarises this effect under the headings of selective exposure, perception and retention.

- 1 *Selective exposure*: Many people avoid watching altogether when politics appear on television or in the press, while those who are interested favour those newspapers or television programmes that support rather than challenge their views.
- 2 *Selective perception*: The views and values that people have serve to 'edit' incoming information so that they tend to accept what they want to believe and ignore what they do not.
- 3 *Selective retention*: The same editing process is applied to what people choose to remember of what they have read or viewed.

The variety of media, moreover, act in different ways as Table 9.3 suggests.

However, the filter-reinforcement thesis seems to assign too minor a role to such an all-pervasive element. It does not

Table 9.3 The press, television and political influence

Television	Press
Balanced	Partisan
Trusted	Not trusted
Mass audience	Segmented audience
'Passive' audience politically	'Active' audience
Most important source of information	Secondary source

Source: Professor David Denver

seem to make 'common' sense. In an age when party preferences have weakened and people are voting much more instrumentally, according to issues, then surely the more objective television coverage has a role to play in switching votes? Is it reasonable to suppose the filter effect negates all information that challenges or conflicts with established positions? If so, then why do parties persist in spending large sums on party political broadcasts? Some empirical data support a direct-influence thesis, especially in respect of television:

- 1 Professor Ivor Crewe has claimed that during election campaigns up to 30 per cent of voters switch their votes, so despite the surface calm in 1983 and 1987 there was considerable 'churning' beneath the surface. These two elections may have been unusual in any case: the before and after campaign variations were much larger in 1979, 1974 and 1970 although not in the landslide 1997 election.
- 2 Many studies reveal that the four weeks of an election campaign provide too short a time over which to judge the impact of the media. Major shifts in voting preference take place between elections, and it is quite possible, or even probable, that media coverage plays a significant role.

Focus groups

Much has been written about New Labour and focus groups, and a great deal of it has been uncomplimentary. They have been cited as evidence of Labour's concern with the superficial, with adapting policy on the basis of marketing expediency and not principle – in other words, as the thin end of the wedge that Old Labour critics argue has robbed the party of its moral purpose and integrity. This point of view was hotly refuted by the chief enthusiast for the technique in the Blairite party: the late Philip Gould, former advertising expert, who wrote a fascinating book on the evolution of the 'new' party and its march to power (Gould 1999). In the following extract he explains the technique and his own reasons for having faith in it:

The eight or so members of the group will have been recruited by a research company according to a formal specification: who they voted for in the last election, their age, their occupation . . . I do not just sit there and listen. I challenge, I argue back, I force them to confront issues. I confront issues myself. I like to use the group to develop and test ideas. (Gould 1999: 327–8)

The permanent campaign

In 2000 Ornstein and Mann edited a book entitled *The Permanent Campaign, and Its Future*. The provenance of the phrase lay in 1982 with Sidney Blumenthal, who used it to describe the emergent style of media coverage in the USA. Assiduous USA watchers in New Labour's elite seem to have absorbed the new approach and made it their own: 'a nonstop process of seeking to manipulate sources of public approval to engage in the act of governing itself' (Hugh Heclo in Ornstein and Mann 2000: 219). In other words, government and campaigning have become indistinguishable. The tendency now is for parties in government to view each day as something to be 'won' or 'lost'.

Assessing the effect of the media

Judging the effect of the media on voting behaviour is very difficult, because it is so hard to disentangle it from a myriad of factors such as family, work, region and class that play a determining role. However, it seems fair to say that:

- 1 *The media reinforce political attitudes:* This is important when the degree of commitment to a party can prove crucial when events between elections, as they always do, put loyalties to the test.
- 2 *The media help to set the agenda of debate:* This 'framing' of the political agenda can be seen on Radio 4's *Today* programme which regularly bases its items on news stories picked from the day's papers. During election campaigns party press conferences attempt to achieve this, but the media do not always conform, and between elections the media, especially the print media, play a much more important agenda-setting role.
- 3 *Media reportage has some direct impact* on persuading voters to change sides, but research has not yet made clear whether this effect is major or marginal.

Theories and the mass media

The mass media and the theory of pluralist democracy

If the mass media have such a transforming impact on politics, then how have they affected the fabric of British democracy? It all depends on what we mean by democracy. The popular and indeed 'official' view is that our elected legislature exerts watchdog control over the executive and allows a large degree of citizen participation in the process of government. This pluralist system provides a free market of ideas and a shifting, open competition for power between political parties, pressure groups and various other groups in society. Supporters of the present system claim that not only is it how the system ought to work (a normative theory of government), but it is, to a large extent, also descriptive: this is how it works in practice.

According to this view, the media play a vital political role:

- 1 They report and represent popular views to those invested with decision-making powers.
- 2 They inform society about the actions of government, educating voters in the issues of the day. The range of newspapers available provides a variety of interpretations and advice.
- 3 They act as a watchdog of the public interest, defending the ordinary person against a possibly over-mighty government through their powers of exposure, investigation and interrogation. To fulfil this neutral, disinterested role, it follows that the media need to be given extensive freedom to question and publish.

This pluralist view of the media's role, once again both normative and descriptive, has been criticised under the following points.

Do ownership and control influence media messages?

Excluding the BBC, the media organisations are substantially part of the business world and embrace profit making as a central objective. This fact alone severely prejudices media claims to objectivity in reporting the news and reflecting popular feeling. In recent years ownership has concentrated markedly. About 80 per cent of newspaper circulation is in the hands of four conglomerates: Associated Newspapers, owned by the Rothermere family and controlling the *Daily*

Mail and *The Mail on Sunday*; the Mirror Newspaper Group, owning the *Mirror*, *Sunday Mirror* and *Sunday People*; United Newspapers, owning the *Express*, the *Sunday Express*, *The Star* and the *Standard*; and News International, severely wounded by the phone-hacking scandal owning *The Times*, *The Sunday Times* and *The Sun*. These latter-day press barons and media groups also own rafts of the regional press and have strong television interests: Murdoch, for example, owns Sky Television (for a fuller analysis see Street 2011: Chapter 6).

Nor is the press especially accountable: the Press Council used to be a powerful and respected watchdog on newspaper editors, but it tended to acquiesce meekly on the concentration of ownership on the grounds that the danger of monopoly control is less unacceptable than the bankruptcy of familiar national titles. Moreover, since *The Sun* regularly flouted its rulings, the council lost even more respect and was unable, for example, to prevent the private lives of public figures being invaded by tabloid journalists to an alarming degree. Following the report of the Leveson inquiry into the press, it was expected that press regulation would be significantly strengthened though in the event this has not happened.

Television evinces a much clearer distinction between ownership and control and fits more easily into the pluralist model. The BBC, of course, is government-owned, and in theory at least, its board of governors exercises independent control. Independent television is privately owned, and this ownership is becoming more concentrated, but the Independent Broadcasting Authority (IBA) uses its considerable legal powers under the 1981 Broadcasting Act to ensure 'balance' and 'due accuracy and impartiality' on sensitive political issues. This is not to say that television can be acquitted of the charge of bias – as we shall see below – but merely that television controllers are forbidden by law to display open partisanship and that those people who own their companies cannot insist on particular editorial lines.

News values are at odds with the requirements of a pluralist system

In order to create profits, media organisations compete for their audiences, with the consequent pursuit of the lowest common denominator in public taste. In the case of the tabloids this means the relegation of hard news to inside pages and the promotion to the front page of trivial stories such as sex scandals, royal family gossip and the comings and goings of soap opera stars. The same tendency has been apparent on television, with the reduction of current affairs programmes, their demotion from peak viewing times and the dilution of news programmes with more 'human interest' stories. As a result of this tendency it can be argued that the media's educative role in a pluralist democracy is being diminished. Some

would go further, however, and maintain that the dominant news values adopted by the media are in any case inappropriate for this role. The experience of successful newspapers has helped to create a set of criteria for judging newsworthiness that news editors in all branches of the media automatically accept and apply more or less intuitively. The themes to which the public are believed to respond include:

- 1 *Personalities*: People quickly become bored with statistics and carefully marshalled arguments and relate to stories that involve disagreement, personality conflicts or interesting personal details.
- 2 *Revelations*: Journalist Nicholas Tomalin once defined news as the making public of something that someone wished to keep secret. Leaked documents, financial malpractice and sexual peccadilloes, e.g. the revelation that John Major had a four-year affair with Edwina Currie, are assiduously reported and eagerly read.
- 3 *Disasters*: The public has both a natural and a somewhat morbid interest in such matters.
- 4 *Visual back-up*: Stories that can be supported by good photographs (or film footage on TV) will often take precedence over those that cannot be so supported.
- 5 *Celebrities*: Increasingly over the past two decades news items relating to celebrities have become of great interest

BOX 9.1

Bias, broadcasting and the political parties

Harold Wilson was notoriously paranoid about the media and believed that not only the press but also the BBC was 'hugely' biased against him, full of 'card-carrying Tories', in the words of Michael Cockerell (1988). Perhaps it is being in government that explains it, as in the 1980s it was Margaret Thatcher and her 'enforcer' Norman Tebbit who seemed paranoid. He launched ferocious attacks on the corporation, calling it 'the insufferable, smug, sanctimonious, naive, guilt-ridden, wet, pink, orthodoxy of that sunset home of that third-rate decade, the sixties' (Collini 2016: 174).

Answering questions in the House can be stressful amid all the noise, but ultimately the barbs can be ignored and the questions avoided easily. But on radio or television well-briefed interviewers can put politicians on the spot. This is why ministers of both parties have complained so vehemently about *Today* presenter John Humphrys

to readers. Consequently media outlets seek to link their content to celebrity of some kind.

It is commonly believed that newspapers which ignore these ground rules will fail commercially and that current affairs television which tries too hard to be serious will be largely ignored and described, fatally, as 'boring'. There is much evidence to suggest that these news values are based on fact: that perhaps to our shame, these are the themes to which we most readily respond. However, it does mean that the vast media industry is engaged in providing a distorted view of the world via its concentration on limited and relatively unimportant aspects of social reality.

The lobby system favours the government of the day

The pluralist model requires that the media report news in a truthful and neutral way. We have already seen that ownership heavily influences the partisanship of the press, but other critics argue that the lobby system of political reporting introduces a distortion of a different kind. Some 150 political journalists at Westminster are known collectively as 'the lobby'. In effect, they belong to a club with strict rules whereby they receive special briefings from government spokesmen in exchange for keeping quiet about their sources. Supporters

and *Newsnight's* Jeremy Paxman. Cockerell explains that Humphrys is not a 'politically motivated questioner; his aim is to strip away the public relations gloss and to use his own sharp teeth to counter pre-rehearsed soundbites' (*The Guardian*, 28th May 1996).

This probably gets to the heart of the perennial conflict between politicians and the media. Politicians in power ideally would like to control the media – Mrs Thatcher once said she did not like short interviews but would like instead to have four hours of airtime on her own – and resent the criticism that they receive from journalists and interviewers. In a pluralist democracy it is indeed the job of the media to make government more accountable to the public, and perhaps it is when politicians do not like it that the media are doing their jobs most effectively (see also Street 2011: Chapter 1).

claim that this is an important means of obtaining information that the public would not otherwise receive, but critics disagree. Anthony Howard, the veteran political commentator, has written that lobby correspondents, rather like prostitutes, become 'clients' or otherwise 'instruments for a politician's gratification' (Hennessy 1985: 9). The charge is that journalists become lazy, uncritical and incurious, preferring to derive their copy from bland government briefings – often delivered at dictation speed.

Television companies are vulnerable to political pressure

Ever since the broadcasting media became an integral part of the political process during the 1950s, governments of all complexions have had uneasy relationships with the BBC, an organisation with a worldwide reputation for excellence and for accurate, objective current affairs coverage. Margaret Thatcher, however, took government hostility to new lengths; indeed, 'abhorrence of the BBC appeared for a while to be a litmus test for the Conservativeness of MPs' (Negrine 1995: 125). Governments seek to influence the BBC in three major ways. First, they have the power of appointment to the corporation's board of governors. The post of chairman is especially important; Marmaduke Hussey's appointment in 1986 was believed to be a response to perceived left-wing tendencies (according to one report, he was ordered by Norman Tebbit's office to 'get in there and sort it out – in days and not months'). Second, governments can threaten to alter the licence system (although former Home Secretary Willie Whitelaw knew of no occasion when this threat had been used): Margaret Thatcher was known to favour the introduction of advertising to finance the BBC, but the Peacock Commission on the financing of television refused to endorse this approach. Third, governments attempt to exert pressure in relation to particular programmes – often citing security reasons. The range of disputes between the Thatcher governments and the BBC is unparalleled in recent history. In part this was a consequence of a dominant, long-established and relatively unchallenged Prime Minister as well as Thatcher's determination to challenge the old consensus – she long suspected that it resided tenaciously within the top echelons of the BBC.

Theories of class dominance

The Glasgow University Media Group

On the basis of their extensive programme analyses, the Glasgow University Media Group suggests that television coverage of economic news tends to place the 'blame for society's industrial and economic problems at the door of the

workforce. This is done in the face of contradictory evidence, which when it appears is either ignored [or] smothered' (1976: 267–8). Reports on industrial relations were 'clearly skewed against the interests of the working class and organised labour . . . in favour of the managers of industry'. The Glasgow research provoked a storm of criticism. In 1985, an academic counterblast was provided by Martin Harrison (1985), who criticised the slender basis of the Glasgow research and adduced new evidence that contradicted its conclusions. The Glasgow research is often cited in support of more general theories on how the media reinforce, protect and advance dominant class interests in society. Variations on the theme were produced by Gramsci, in the 1930s by the Frankfurt School of social theorists and in the 1970s by the sociocultural approach of Professor Stuart Hall (for detailed analysis see McQuail 1983: 57–70; Watts 1997), but the essence of their case is summed up in Marx's proposition that 'the ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas'. He argued that those people who own and control the economic means of production – the ruling class – will seek to persuade everyone else that preserving status quo values and institutions is in the interests of society as a whole.

The means employed are infinitely subtle and indirect, via religious ideas, support for the institution of the family, the monarchy and much else. Inevitably the role of the mass media, according to this analysis, is crucial. Marxists totally reject the pluralist model of the media as independent and neutral, as the servant rather than the master of society. They see the media merely as the instrument of class domination, owned by the ruling class and carrying their messages into every home in the land. It is in moments of crisis, Marxists would claim, that the fundamental bias of state institutions is made clear. In 1926, during the General Strike, Lord Reith, the first Director General of the BBC, provided some evidence for this view when he confided to his diary, 'they want us to be able to say they did not commandeer us, but they know they can trust us not to be really impartial' (see also Street 2011: 289–301).

Supporters of Jeremy Corbyn also deployed a Marxist argument against the many columnists who savaged their hero, the Labour leader. Writing in *The Guardian* on 14th June 2017, George Monbiot – a journalist who himself once despaired of Corbyn – saw the question in class dominance terms:

Wherever they come from, journalists, on average, end up better paid than most people. Whatever their professed beliefs, they tend to be drawn towards their class interests.

Which of the two models – pluralist or class dominance – better describes the role of the media in British society? From the discussion so far, the pluralist model would appear

inadequate in a number of respects. Its ability to act as a fair and accurate channel of communication between government and society is distorted by the political bias of the press, the lobby system, news values and the tendency of television to reflect consensual values. Moreover, the media are far from being truly independent: the press is largely owned by capitalist enterprises, and television is vulnerable to government pressure of various kinds. Does this mean that the dominance model is closer to the truth? Not really.

- 1 As former editor of *ITN News*, David Nicholas observes, 'trying to manipulate the news is as natural an instinct to a politician as breathing oxygen', but because politicians try does not mean that they always succeed. People who work in the media jealously guard their freedom and vigorously resist government interference (Jones 1986).
- 2 The media may tend to reflect consensual views, but this does not prevent radical messages regularly breaking into the news – sometimes because they accord with news values themselves. Television also challenges and criticises the status quo at the humorous level: for example, in the form of the satirical *The Thick of It* and at the serious level in the form of the BBC's regular *Panorama* programme.
- 3 Programmes such as *Rough Justice* and *First Tuesday* in the past have shown that persistent and highly professional research can shame a reluctant establishment into action to reverse injustices – as in the case of the Guildford Four, released in 1989 after 15 years of wrongful imprisonment.
- 4 News values do not invariably serve ruling-class interests; otherwise governments would not try so hard to manipulate them. And even the most serious of the quality newspapers will join the feeding frenzy of a scandal once it has taken hold.

Each model, then, contains elements of the truth, but neither comes near the whole truth. Which is the nearer? The reader must decide; but despite all its inadequacies and distortions the pluralist model probably offers the better framework for understanding how the mass media interact with the British political system. It is clear that certain parts of the media – the quality press, the political weeklies, BBC, ITN and Sky News, BBC Radios 4 and 5 plus the little-watched Parliament Channel – all contribute greatly towards an informed democracy. It is also clear that other parts – the daily and Sunday tabloids, commercial radio – in relative terms do not, though, as we have seen, the more subtle influence of entertainment programmes like soaps and game shows do have to be taken into account.

Language and politics

All this modern emphasis on technology can obscure the fact that in politics language is still of crucial importance. Taking the example of Northern Ireland, we have seen how the precise meaning of words has provided a passionate bone of contention. When the IRA announced its ceasefire in 1994, its opponents insisted it should be a 'permanent' one. However, the paramilitary organisation did not wish to abandon its ability to use the threat of violence as a negotiating counter and refused to comply, insisting that its term 'complete' ceasefire was as good as the British government needed or would in any case get. Gerry Adams, president of the political wing of the IRA, Sinn Féin, had a similar problem over his attitude towards bombings. His close contact with the bombers made it impossible for him to condemn the bombing of Manchester in June 1996, so he used other less committing words like 'regret' or 'unfortunate'. Another aspect is tone of voice, which can bestow whole varieties of meaning to a statement or a speech. Sir Patrick Mayhew, for example, John Major's Northern Ireland Secretary, specialised in being 'calm'. Mark Thompson, former BBC's Director General made these perceptive remarks on Donald Trump's highly successful use of language:

The Trump style eschews any kind of rhetorical cleverness. The shocking statements are not couched in witty or allusive language. His campaign slogan – Make America Great Again! – could hardly be less original or artful. Everything is intended to emphasise the break with the despised language of the men and women of the Washington machine. There is a wall between them and you, Trump seems to say to his audience, but I am on this side of the wall alongside you. They treat you as stupid, but you understand things far better than they do. The guarantee that I see the world as you do is the fact that I speak in your language, not theirs.

(Thompson 2016a)

Press regulation in the UK

Since the 2012 Leveson Report, press regulation in the UK has been in limbo as neither the press nor the government can agree on key elements of a new system. The Press Complaints Commission (PCC) was judged to be too weak – especially in relation to the phone hacking scandal, and press inclined to provide suitable regulation but when Leveson proposed a system underpinned by a Royal Charter, the press bitterly opposed what they suspected might lead to government limitations on the foundations of free press, freedom of speech. The Press Recognition Panel (PRP) was established to judge

whether regulators met Royal Charter criteria. Section 40 of the Crime and Courts Act 2013 lays down that if publishers are not regulated by Royal Charter, they must pay the costs of both sides of any dispute, even if they are successful, an encouragement, say critics, to unscrupulous libel actions. By 2016 there were two regulatory bodies: the Independent Press Standards Organisation (IPSO) which replaced the PCC but retained many of its features. It has 12 members, chaired by Court of Appeal judge Sir Alan Moses and 12 members, 5 of whom represent the media and 7 are independent. IMPRESS was a body formed in 2016 which followed Leveson's recommendations and has been recognised by the PRP. However, IPSO has challenged the legitimacy of IMPRESS and the matter is still under review.

Ofcom This regulatory body was set up in 2001 to exercise control over the rapidly burgeoning world of new broadcast channels. It took over the roles formerly performed by bodies such as The Broadcasting Standards Commission and the Office of Telecommunications (OfTel) plus in 2011 the Postal Services Commission. Under the Conservative-dominated Coalition government, Ofcom shed its policy-making functions to the Department for Culture Media and Sport.

The new media

When the internet was first invented it was initially perceived as the plaything of scientists and IT nerds. Very quickly this view changed as online access has forged a revolution in the way the world communicates, shops, does business and even conducts its social relationships. Inevitably it has had a huge impact upon politics, especially the way news is disseminated and believed.

- 1 **Information:** It is now possible to download from the internet immense amounts of up-to-date information about political issues via the internet and communicate via a number of different online routes.
- 2 **E-mail:** It is possible to communicate with politicians and the politically active all over the world, extending enormously the scope of political action.
- 3 **Blogs:** It is now possible for anyone to set up their own website and issue opinions and information to the world on a regular basis. In the year 2005 it was calculated that 80,000 weblogs (blogs) were created and their rate of increase became exponential. Many younger people now use such sources as a matter of course, and some – like the US Drudge Report – break new stories or influence election campaigns. However, individual blogs tended to disappear quickly and 'blogs' now more often appear as regular online updates from corporate organisations or institutions like university politics departments.

- 4 **Interactive democracy:** By being hooked up to the internet, it might be possible for politicians or government in democracies to seek endorsement for policies directly from the people. This would have all kinds of drawbacks: for example, it could slow down the political process even more than at present in developed countries; it could give a platform to unsavoury messages from racists and power-seeking ideologues; it might enthrone the majority with a power it chooses to abuse. But these opportunities exist, and it is virtually certain that they will be experimented with if not adopted in the near future.

Fareed Zakaria offers this insight into the implications of this ongoing revolution:

Today's information revolution has produced thousands of outlets for news that make central control impossible and dissent easy. The Internet has taken this process another huge step forward, being a system where, in the columnist Thomas Friedman's words, 'Everyone is connected but no one is in control'.
(Zakaria 2004:17)

However, the internet still has some way to go before the existing media are usurped. Most blogs are staffed by one or two people only; they do not have the same income as mainstream media; their scoops are still rare and often confined to fringe issues and political gossip. But, as Box 9.3 suggests, in the USA maybe the locus of power is shifting much faster than in the UK. The 2017 election campaign, however, seems to have seen the emergence of several quite influential blogs. Robert Booth in *The Guardian* (1st June 2017) reports that 'Highly partisan, semi-professional political blogs are being shared more widely online than the views of well known mainstream newspaper commentators.' He cites 'Another Angry Voice' and 'The Canary', two pro-Corbyn sites which can boast millions of users.

- 5 **Mobile phones:** Virtually everyone now owns a mobile phone and this fact, together with the onrush of technology, has produced the transmission of more and more different types of information via their tiny screens. Some political parties have issued text messages to phone owners, but in 2006 more possibilities were opened up by the mobile provider which announced the results of an experiment whereby television had been broadcast direct to mobile phone subscribers. Despite the smallness of the screens, the trial was declared successful with thousands of mobile owners watching several hours of television a week – though most of it at home rather than on the move. Inevitably news and political content will in future be imbibed via this unlikely route and will become yet another facet of the political media.

- 6 *Online pressure groups*: in recent years a number of online organisations have sprung up – Avaas in the USA, 38 Degrees in the UK, Change.org – which solicit support for (mostly) left-of-centre causes and compile impressively large online petitions which are used to pressurise decision-makers.
- 7 *Twitter*: This relatively new social medium launched in 2006 whereby users can post brief messages of no more than 280 characters after November 2017. In the UK it is used for comment and occasionally revelations as in the North Wales child abuse case when various suggestions as to who the alleged senior Tory official involved might be. Abroad these short, text-like messages were used by the initiators of the 2011 ‘Arab Spring’ to coordinate movements in countries like Egypt, Tunisia and Iran. Many politicians use their Twitter accounts for political purposes. George Galloway has 150,000 ‘followers’ on Twitter, over twice the population of the average constituency. The ‘King of Twitter’ however has to be President Donald Trump whose drawn out campaign for the presidency featured a plethora of accompanying tweets on all manner of matters. Many of these were issued in the small hours when Trump was at home in Trump Tower, thinking about the events of the day and seeking to set the news agenda for the next. Short pithy messages proved effective in accessing the short attention spans of his core vote and leading the media in his chosen direction.

Writing in *The Times* on 17 October 2012, Tony Blair’s former spin doctor, Alastair Campbell, delivered his incisive judgements on how the new media have transformed the political landscape.

The speed of change is breathtaking. Facebook, founded in 2004 recently recorded its one

billionth devotee. YouTube, created in 2005, now has more videos downloaded in one month than three US TV networks created in 60 years. Twitter launched in 2006 has more than 900 million users with 800,000 joining every day. The number of British people on Twitter, 10 million – has overtaken the number buying a daily newspaper. . . .

Where [the Democrats’ Obama campaign] did use Facebook brilliantly was in identifying supporters and turning them into activist ambassadors. In an era when people believe politicians and journalists less than they used to, they still respect each other. And therein lies the power of social media as a political force – a tech version of old-fashioned, word-of-mouth campaigning. . . .

What they [politicians] really fear is losing control. . . . Nobody controls how the message lands. What this offers politicians is the opportunity to communicate directly without having to rely on elites of the old media. That is both emancipating and democratic. . . . Today the agenda changes by the hour, often with a big gap between what the media deem newsworthy and what the public decide is “most viewed” or “most read”. . . .

Today governments are having to adapt to changes driven by technology and the personalisation of communications. If they don’t, the results can be seismic. . . .

There is an inescapable momentum behind the flow of political power to individuals and

BOX 9.2

Blogs come of age: The Huffington Post

Starting in 2005 as a blog initiated by, amongst others, Arianna Huffington, Greek-born, Oxbridge-educated and oil millionaire divorcee, the ‘HuffPo’ has been making waves in the USA for some time. Moreover, while print journalism licks its wounds at redundancies and closures, the liberal blog poured millions into filling the gap left by the disappearing investigative news teams. The rise of this blog was astonishing and it now calls itself an ‘internet newspaper’, does its own investigations and provides

mainstream news and comment. Less than 4 years old and with fewer than 60 staff (including 7 news reporters), it is now a competitor to *The New York Times*, 158 years old and with more than 1,000 journalists. According to the ratings website Comscore, in February 2017 the HuffPo drew more than a third of the *Times*’ traffic: 7.3 million unique users to 18.4 million.

Source: Pilkington (2009)

movements which recognise no national boundaries. . . . [Politicians] must understand that the only voice they can control is their own, and they must be prepared for the voters’ response to echo across the digital world.

8. ‘Bots’: these are computer-driven disseminators of messages to a wide audience who usually receive them unsolicited. As one Oxford scholar defines them ‘Bots are software intended to perform simple repetitive “robotic” tasks. They can be used to perform legitimate tasks like delivering news and information – real news as well as junk – or undertake malicious activities like spamming, harassment and hate speech. Whatever their uses, highly automated

socials media accounts are able to rapidly deploy messages, replicate themselves and pass as human users. They are a pernicious means of spreading junk news over social networks of family and friends’ (Gallacher et al. 2017; also good on Twitter usage).

Post-‘truth’ politics

One unwelcome newcomer to the world of media analysis has been the phenomenon of ‘fake news’ or the dissemination of alleged facts that are designed to advance a political cause or, just as likely, damage another. Totalitarian regimes like Hitler’s and Stalin’s regarded truth as something within

BOX 9.3

BRITAIN IN CONTEXT

The media

The nature of the media in any country is usually a reflection of its political character. Democracies believe in freedom of speech and hence in open media, though politicians in democracies seek constantly to manipulate the media to their own advantage. In authoritarian systems the media are usually heavily controlled in terms of what newspapers can print or broadcasters can say on air.

The media in the UK play a similar role to those in the USA. The major difference is that in the latter, candidates can buy airtime to show their own political ads and to issue ‘attack ads’ to weaken opposing candidates. As such ads are very expensive this gives an advantage to campaigns which are well funded. Indeed, many candidates in the USA and incumbent legislators, governors and so forth, spend much of their energies raising campaign cash. The phenomenon of ‘spin doctors’ was more or less invented in the USA where sculpting messages or media images for mass consumption has been something of a growth industry; they have since been disseminated worldwide to wherever democratic elections are regularly held. Much campaign output is either ‘semi-mediated’ like the presidential debates or ‘mediated’ in news broadcasts, but in the latter case candidates and their aides have become clever in gaining favourable media attention.

Many media critics claim that in the US the media favour the right in that they reflect and reinforce attitudes wholly accepting of the status quo. They point to Fox

News, owned by Rupert Murdoch which leans towards a Republican view of issues and news stories. It became an enthusiastic supporter of Donald Trump after 2015. As in the UK debate, others deny any bias and argue the media are essentially free to state views and opinions. But this argument attains a worldwide dimension when ownership of the media is examined. Huge media conglomerates like Murdoch’s News Corporation or Berlusconi’s Mediaset control media in other countries and there is concern that political control is thereby connected. Murdoch, for example, broadcasts satellite television into China and agreed to some censorship controls demanded by the government of that country.

Such control worries those concerned to spread freedom and democracy. Alastair Campbell acknowledges the growing impact of blogs and Twitter and celebrates their democratic nature. But autocratic governments fear such freedom, are aware of its actual and potential power and will use coercive methods to neutralise it: imprisoning bloggers and tracking down dissident Twitter users. However, the advantage of the new media is their ubiquity and range; despite his best efforts President Bashar al-Assad of Syria was unable to prevent mobile phone videos of his army’s Sarin gas atrocities from reaching the outside world in March 2017. Finally, it has to be said that the growing incidence of ‘fake news’ and the so-called ‘post truth politics’ threatens the health of democracy worldwide.

their own power to control and were willing to claim, deny or invent as necessary, even to alter official history if necessary. Vladimir Putin's Russia has long been active in pumping such misleading propaganda at near industrial levels. However, the

Chapter summary

The spoken voice was the main form of political communication until the spread of newspapers in the nineteenth century. Broadcasting introduced a revolution into the way politics is conducted as its spread is instant and its influence so great. New political actors have emerged specialising in the media, and politicians have learned to master their techniques. Press news values tend to influence television also, but the latter is more vulnerable to political pressure than the already politicised press. Class dominance theories suggest that the media are no more than an instrument of the ruling class, but there is reason to believe that they exercise considerable independence and are not incompatible with democracy.

Discussion points

- Should British political parties be allowed to buy political advertising on television?
- Has televising Parliament enhanced or detracted from the efficacy of Parliament?
- Does television substantially affect voting behaviour?
- Do the media reinforce the political status quo or challenge it?
- Should interviewers risk appearing rude when confronting politicians?
- How important have blogs and online pressure groups become in disseminating news and comment?

Further reading

By far the best current study of the mass media is by John Street, whose second edition appeared in 2011. It is clearly written, comprehensive and takes an international perspective rather than a narrowly national one. Another very useful study is Negrine (2008), and Budge et al. (2007) provide two excellent chapters (13 and 14). The two most readable studies of leadership, the media and politics are both by Michael Cockerell (Cockerell 1988; Cockerell et al. 1984). Bruce (1992) is good on the behaviour of politicians in relation to the media. Blumler and Gurevitch (1995) is an essay on the crisis of communication for citizenship and as such is an interesting source of ideas. See Jones (1993) on the television interview. The most brilliant and funny book about the press is still Chippendale and Orrie's history of *The Sun* (1992). On the modern use of political language see Mark Thompson's important book (2016b).

politician most associated with 'fake news' has been the US President Donald Trump. (See 'And Another Thing...' at end of Part II for a fuller analysis of fake news.)

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BBC charter review: www.bbc.charterreview.org.uk
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Useful websites

UK Media Internet Directory: Newspapers: [www.mcc.ac.uk/
jcridlan.htm](http://www.mcc.ac.uk/jcridlan.htm)

The Daily Telegraph: www.telegraph.co.uk

The Independent: www.independent.co.uk

The Times: www.the-times.co.uk

The Guardian: www.guardian.co.uk

Blogs

Samizdata: <http://samizdata.net/blog/>

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