# The mass media

# 10

**In advanced Western democracies, the media perform a major role. Freedom of expression is well established in the West and journalists are vigorous players on the political scene. They are sometimes portrayed as the 'fourth branch of government' or the 'fourth estate', rivalling the three official branches of political power. Television and the press can't actually do what the other three branches do, but the way in which they help to shape attitudes makes them very significant in the political process. We live in a media-saturated society and, in the eyes of some analysts, the media now wield excessive political influence.**

**In this chapter, our primary concern is with the impact on political life of the two major mass media: the press and television.**

## POINTS TO CONSIDER

- What is meant by the term 'cross-media ownership' and what problems can arise as a result of its occurrence?
- How do the media set the agenda for political discussion?
- How and why do politicians attempt to 'sell' themselves via television?
- What is the role of political consultants?
- What is meant by the 'Americanisation' of British electioneering?
- What are the main differences in the way television covers political issues and personalities on either side of the Atlantic?

By the mass media, we mean those means of communication which permit messages to be conveyed to the public. Media such as television, radio, newspapers, books, magazines, posters, the cinema and, more recently, videos and computers provide important links connecting people to one another. They allow information to be passed from one person to a vast audience at approximately the same time. Sending a fax or e-mail to a friend is a personal form of communication, but if the message is sent simultaneously to large numbers of people it becomes part of the mass media. The mass media can reach a large and potentially unlimited number of people at the same time.

The most important forms of the media are newspapers and broadcasting by radio and television, but over the last generation television has surpassed any other medium as the source from which the majority of people derive their information (see table below), for it provides an easily accessible, easily digested and credible medium available in almost every household. Today, how voters view politics and politicians is much influenced by television. Politicians recognise this and act accordingly, often seeking to influence the television at least as much as they are influenced by it.

But other forms of communication exist, including a number of ways by which local communities can exercise some political muscle. In the United States, these may range from the familiar to the uncommon. In New Jersey, those who opposed a tax increase organised a mass phone-in to a radio station to attract attention to their grievance, as part of a general revolt against their growing burden of taxation. By contrast, landlords in California who objected to the introduction of rent control decided to circulate video tapes which depicted pro-control members of the Santa Monica city council in an unflattering light. In 1997, the Referendum Party sent a video to every British household, as a means of conveying its anti-European message.

**Sources of political information in Britain and the United States**

| *Source* | *% in Britain* | *% in United States* |
|---|---|---|
| Television | 62 | 63 |
| Newspapers | 23 | 22 |
| Radio | 14 | 12 |
| Other | 1 | 3 |

Source: Adapted from contents of tables in E. Gerber, 'Divided We Watch', *Brills Content* (Feb. 2001) and IBA/ITC research findings.

## Organisation, ownership and control in Britain and America

Britain has a centralised communications system, a factor related to geography and population distribution. By European standards, the population is urbanised, the majority living in the area between London and

Manchester. Regional media declined as the twentieth century progressed. The regional press has become significantly smaller since 1918, and although since the early days BBC and ITV have always had a regional element, BBC2 and Channels Four and Five are solely national ones. The political system too has always been highly centralised, encouraging the media to emphasise national concerns at the expense of regional ones.

Another feature of the British media is the balance which has been struck between the values of commercialism and public service. Commercialism is represented by the private ownership of the press and of ITV, and public

**Public service broadcasting**

From the time of its establishment as a public corporation, the BBC has always been viewed as a vital national resource which must operate in the public interest. As an institution, it was committed to the broad social and political objectives of informing, educating and entertaining, rather than the maximisation of profit. When commercial television came along, it posed a threat to these notions of public service broadcasting, and television could have gone downmarket in a bid for viewers. To a considerable extent, the danger was avoided because the 1954 Act that established ITV set out guidelines concerning the amount of news and current affairs programming it should have and the need for a high degree of impartiality. There were significant differences in the institutional ethos and funding of the two stations, but ITV was in important respects fashioned in the BBC's image.

There developed a great convergence between public and commercial broadcasting in Britain in which the two sides influenced each other. Both shared a belief in the importance of news and current affairs programming, and recognised the importance of informing the nation, and they became two halves of the same system which, in Wedell's words, 'derived from a single root and . . . these branches, instead of diverging over the years . . . stabilised their concentration more or less in parallel. There was a circumscribed form of competition as BBC and ITV producers vied for their reputations, critical renown and audience approval.[1]

The concept of public service broadcasting which both channels embraced was characterised by several shared beliefs, namely that:

- everyone should have access to the same service;
- all interests and tastes should be catered for, including minority ones;
- both national identity and a sense of community should be recognised;
- the television service should be free from the influence of vested interests or of government;
- competition should be in the field of quality programming, rather than the pursuit of the highest ratings;
- there should be no competition for revenue, with one channel being funded by the body of users and the other by advertising.

These features underpinned the duopoly of British broadcasting, and the domination of the duopoly went unchallenged until the 1980s. As that decade progressed, Margaret Thatcher began to lament the lack of competition in British television, and was keen to encourage technological innovations which were to change the character of broadcasting.

service by the BBC. There is a public-service requirement to which commercial television broadcasters are expected to respond.

Much of the development in the British media has been influenced by what has happened in the USA. Ideas and innovations have often come from across the Atlantic, and many press moguls on the British stage have spent much of their life in North America – the Astor family, the Canadians Roy Thomson and Conrad Black, and the Australian-American Rupert Murdoch. Many American communications companies are active in Britain, with several cable concerns and some large telephone companies having bases here.

In Britain, newspapers have declined in the postwar era, sales records having been established in the 1940s and 1950s. Tunstall points out that 50m Britons purchased 30m newspapers on a typical Sunday in 1955, whereas in 1995 58m bought only 16m – itself a figure higher than that for today.[2] Most of the papers published daily and on Sundays in the mid-1990s had changed ownership at least once in the previous two decades. The trend in recent years has been to a concentration of ownership, with major actors on the newspaper/magazine scene being groups such as News International, the Mirror and Pearson Groups, and Trinity Publishing.

The postwar reduction in the number of newspapers and the tendency towards ownership being concentrated in too few hands meant that for many years there was a preponderance of right-wing views. In spite of this trend, Labour has shown that it can win elections handsomely, partly because Tony Blair has been so skilful in his wooing of newspaper proprietors such as Rupert Murdoch. Since 1997, it has sometimes seemed that keeping the owner of News International on board has been more important than retaining the support of traditional Labour loyalists, so that electoral success has been achieved at a cost. Another effect of the trend to a concentration of ownership has been to reduce the availability of alternative ideas. Left-wing critics dislike the way in which the process of disseminating political news and other current affairs information is reliant upon a few newspaper owners. They argue the case for choice in a democracy.

The relaxation of the regulations on cross-media ownership in recent years has meant that several media companies have emerged with wide interests in several areas of the communications industry. For example:

- ***News International*** owns several newspaper titles (*The Times*, the *Sunday Times*, *The News of the World* and *The Sun*), 40 per cent of BSkyB, HarperCollins (the book publisher), a share in Talk Radio, apart from its world-wide interests in Australia, America and Asia.
- ***Pearson*** owns the *Financial Times*, North of England Newspapers, Westminster Press, Thames TV, an interest in Essex Radio, and publishing chains such as Longman, Penguin and Viking.

The two older technologies, newspapers and the radio, continue to be significant among the American media. Newspapers are the oldest form of mass communication in the US, with some 80 per cent of adult Americans now reading a paper on a regular basis. America has traditionally lacked a strong national press, which is not surprising given the divergent interests of people in different parts of the country, and the difficulties of transporting morning editions quickly around the country. The middle-market *USA Today* has helped to fill the gap, but the likelihood is that over the next few years more national papers will be created, given the new technology available. In the meantime, however, in most American cities there is only one regular newspaper available, although countrywide there are some 1800 titles. Small-town dailies thrive on presenting stories of local interest, but may also provide a sketchy coverage of national events.

Americans have always been deeply attached to their free press. Newspapers are often criticised for their bias, on the Right there being complaints that they are dominated by a liberal elite and on the Left that they are unduly influenced by rich and powerful moguls. They may be sometimes attacked as unduly sensationalist in their coverage of events and too obsessed with the trivia of the personal lives of those who aspire to lead them. But many voters trust their journalists more than their politicians and have a strong suspicion that exposés of corruption and scandal are more than likely to be justified. In episodes such as Watergate and the Iran–Contra affair (see pp. 12–13), they had reason to be grateful for the investigative instincts of persistent newshounds.

Unlike Britain, there is no concept of public service broadcasting in America, on either radio or television. Radio is still extensively used in the United States. It had always remained popular as an outlet for political advertising in some of the smaller states, but has recently experienced a surprising revival in the television age. The popularity of chat shows and particularly phone-in programmes of the *Talk Radio* variety has aroused considerable interest, as have the new stations which cater for minority groups and tastes. Radio talk shows have been described as the equivalent of 'a 1990s American town meeting',[3] a chance for the voters to listen to and call the candidates. These may have vast audiences, and act as a lively medium for the exchange of views between often-conservative presenters and equally (if not more) right-wing listeners. Individuals can vent their feelings, however blatant, and listen to those of others.

Television in the USA is still dominated by three major commercial TV networks – CBS, NBC and ABC – although their hold has weakened in recent years. These networks sell programmes to local broadcast stations known as affiliates, and in 1995 the three long-established ones each had more than 200

of these, Fox Broadcasting some 150 or so. What has happened in the last decade, is that the hold of the three networks has been challenged not only by Fox but also by the development of new technologies which are widening the

**The debate about ownership and control of the media**

In Britain, the rest of Europe and America there has been a trend towards concentration of ownership, and concerns about whether this is harmful to democracy. Powerful tycoons head vast corporations often owned and dominated by a few individuals and families, many of whom also have extensive publishing and broadcasting empires including television and the wider entertainment industry.

Australia has the greatest concentration of media ownership in the Western world, control being dominated by Rupert Murdoch and Kerry Packer who respectively control the press and television (plus the bulk of the nation's magazines). France has the Hersant and Hachette information empires, Germany has the Springer and Gruner organisations, and in Italy Berlusconi, Agnelli, Ferruzzi and De Benedetti (who made their money in real estate, automobiles, food and chemicals, and industry and finance, respectively), have all bought substantial interests in the old and new media fields. All of these moguls have found that ownership of the media business in the 1980s and 1990s is a very lucrative business. Beyond making money, however, they wish to influence public opinion and the political arena.

By their own testimony, the multi-millionaires who can afford to own newspapers are not just in the business of making a fast profit; indeed, in the case of *The Times*, Rupert Murdoch has been content to suffer a loss for much of its existence. His purpose, and that of other corporate giants, is to shape the political environment in which they operate. In the longer term, the rewards of Berlusconi, Murdoch and others in their own country and around the world are considerable. They can propagate their views and hope to influence decision-making in areas which matter to them, such as the future of their businesses.

In the United States there are similar tendencies. The number of cities where there are competing newspaper firms has steadily declined. More than 70 per cent of local newspapers are now controlled by large publishing chains in which the owners lay down the editorial policy which editors are expected to follow. In their defence, these American corporations do help to 'nationalise' coverage by providing information on what is happening in Washington and abroad, whereas local ownership tends to emphasise local preoccupations. This could be all the more important as America lacks a public broadcasting service such as that provided by the BBC in Britain.

Private ownership of newspapers, rather than any form of state control or interference, is widely seen as a guarantee of freedom of choice and a bulwark against state tyranny. But some commentators wonder if it is healthy if a few proprietors can dominate the dissemination of ideas. After all, moguls of the past have been open about their motives. Lord Beaverbrook made it clear that he ran the *Daily Express* 'for the purpose of propaganda, and with no other motive'. Lord Northcliffe referred to his wish to be able to tell the people 'whom to love, whom to hate, and what to think'.

A former journalist and Labour MP, Robin Corbett has explained the dangers of Murdochian

choice available to viewers. Many Americans now get their television signals not over the air but via cables. Several cable-only channels have emerged, such as CNN and C-Span.

dominance in the House of Commons. Having referred to Murdoch's 'awesome power', he went on to say that it

> **threatens our democracy. It is not simply because Mr Murdoch interferes with editorial policy, which he does, but because his staff from the moment they are employed know what is expected of them and they know what to write and how to write – and if they do not they will be out the front door before they can pick up their hat and coat.**[4]

As the potential profitability of television became apparent, news and radio proprietors have been keen to buy into television so that a pattern of cross-media ownership was established. In the eyes of their critics, such combines can have very detrimental effects. In particular, they:

- determine entry into the media market, promoting their own interests by eliminating the prospect of rivalry;
- erode diversity of choice, resulting in a more homogeneous presentation of issues so that the public has less varied information;
- reduce the availability of countervailing power centres to governmental policy. (If the powerful proprietors are sympathetic to those in office, then there is less likely to be any serious dissent or critical analysis, and there may be 'no-go' areas for investigative reporting – in the way that Rupert Murdoch is alleged to be reluctant to criticise the Chinese Communist regime for fear of jeopardising his prospects of establishing a foothold in that country);
- use their outlets to act as a megaphone for the proprietors' own social and political ambitions.

The media sector is a fast-changing one, and it is difficult to establish a regulatory framework which can keep apace with technological advances, cross-media alliances and global networks. Both Britain and America have tried to limit cross-media ownership, prohibiting newspapers from dominating the television industry as well. But they have recognised that the question of cross-media ownership is a complex and controversial area of policy. It seems self-evident that the existence of a diversity of media organisations must be to the benefit of the public, as this should ensure that the opinions and perspective of different groups within society get a hearing. Yet to impose strict curbs on ownership might be to affect adversely the economic prosperity of the media sector, one of the fastest-growing sectors of the modern economy. The European Publishers Council (EPC) has reported on the issue, its review noting that

> **cross-media activity is not only inevitable, but essential if newspapers and magazine publishers are not to lose competitive advantage and so atrophy . . . Large-scale deregulation of national cross-media ownership restrictions is a prerequisite for economic growth in order that European media companies can compete in the world market.**[5]

# Political coverage in the media in Britain and America

## Setting the agenda

Journalists are necessarily selective in what they show, but by their choice they convey what they regard as important. They give status to events and people, for an interview on national television can help to turn someone into a national figure. They have the power to enhance or undermine the standing of political leaders. In the USA in the 1930s, they chose to conceal the fact that President Franklin Roosevelt was in a wheelchair and had a mistress, whereas more recently they were happy to report extensively on President Clinton's sexual preferences and habits. Today, all political leaders have to live with the probing eye of investigative journalists who are keen to expose examples of wrong-doing. This was and is of course in the nature of their work, but the character of their coverage has become more searching and damaging to those in authority. Journalists realise that scandals – sexual or financial – often make compelling viewing, and in the inter-channel battle for viewers this is an important consideration. Moreover, since the abuses of presidential power which occurred in Watergate and Vietnam, they are less willing to accept what politicians do and say without challenge. In their investigations and exposures, journalists are reflecting and perhaps contributing to declining levels of public confidence in those who rule over us.

**agenda-setting**
The media function of directing people's attention to particular issues for their consideration; giving some issues special, sometimes disproportionate, coverage.

**Agenda-setting** is a key function of the media. Editors and journalists create an agenda of national priorities, deciding what is to be regarded as serious, what counts for little and what can be ignored. If an issue appears on the journalists' agenda, it is likely to be more widely discussed by individuals and groups in society. The media may not have the power to tell people what they should think, but they can tell them what they should be thinking about. By emphasising the problems of inner cities in Britain, or of environmental degradation and of national defence in America, they have an effect on people's perceptions of how important these issues really are. As Gary Wasserman has written:

> **How the problems are presented will influence which explanations of them are more acceptable than others, and which policies are appropriate as responses. Whether inner-city crime is tied to the need for more police or with inadequate drug programmes, will help shape public debate. Likewise, if unemployment in California is tied to illegal immigration rather than the lack of vocational training, the solution may be frontier barriers rather than aid to education.**[6]

Journalists have their own criteria for deciding what is worth reporting as a good 'news' story. Much news is bad news, a point reflected in the phrase used by some Conservative MPs several years ago when speaking of the radio

programme, 'The World at One'; they re-labelled it as 'The world is glum'. Other news concerns examples of conflict in society, whether it be racial attacks/violence in Britain, religious and other divisions in Northern Ireland, or ethnic cleansing in former Yugoslavia. Again, stories often are about famous people and the lives (preferably the scandalous lives) they lead. All of these are better from the point of view of a television producer if they are accompanied by 'good visuals'.

The mass media, ever on the look-out for a good story, find the political arena an almost limitless source of material. The demand for news is ever-increasing, and both broadcasters and politicians have an interest in what is presented and how stories are handled. Political stories can be welcome to politicians as a vehicle for publicity and promotion of their ideas, but if they are hostile they may be viewed with alarm. For the broadcasting media, they are the very essence of lively journalism.

### The nature and quality of coverage

Political exposure on television comes via several outlets. Politicians appear on a range of programmes from news bulletins to current affairs episodes, from the broadcasting of political events to special election features. There are also newer types of coverage. The Americans speak of 'infotainment': programmes which employ the techniques of entertainment to present more serious issues. Among them are chat shows. which have a markedly less political agenda but which still provide an opportunity to project personality and get the message across in a less demanding atmosphere.

In recent years, the trend has been for even the more overtly political programmes to be presented in a way which grabs the attention. Rather than the early methods of 'talking heads', round-table discussions between weighty interviewees and a generally serious treatment of heavy issues, the emphasis is on featuring stories which are 'made for television', with good pictorial back-up. Such developments feed the fears of those who feel that television tends to trivialise and sensationalise politics. Producers are always on the look-out for opportunities to stress the confrontational approach, with plenty of personality clashes and scenes of groups and individuals locked in disagreement and conflict. As elections approach, these tendencies became ever more apparent.

In addition, politicians can communicate via the press. They like to receive as much coverage of their meetings, speeches and performances in the legislature as possible, and they are often adept at sending communications to editors outlining their lists of engagements as well as summaries of their contributions to public debate. They may also write newspaper columns. Once elected, the US Presidents may make use of the televised Presidential Press Conference.

**Political coverage at election time (see also the effects of television on elections and electioneering, pp. 256–9)**

*Political interviews*

There is a tradition in Britain of the extended political interview, often with a studio audience. They are less used in most other democracies and are not common in America. Interviews are useful as a means of establishing facts, probing motives and holding politicians to account. They also help the politician to develop his or her public persona, so that in Bruce's words, 'they are about performance'.[7]

*Debates*

Britain has not yet staged a debate between the party leaders. (The nearest we have is the studio discussion in which a speaker from either side of the political divide is chosen to put forward the party's viewpoint.) Leaders of the Opposition tend to urge such contests, sensing an opportunity to embarrass an incumbent Prime Minister. Routinely, the people in Downing Street or their advisers, reject them, perhaps because – as with the political interview – once in the studio and under starter's orders, politicians are effectively on their own. As Bruce explains: 'Any incumbent who accepts the challenge of their opponent in this form needs their head examined. The latter has very little to lose and the former very little to gain'.[8]

In America, debates have become the pre-eminent media event of the campaign, attracting vast audiences of 80–90 million. Depending on the format adopted they can be useful in clarifying the policies of those participating, and they allow the viewer to make a choice between the merits of rival candidates and to assess their effectiveness and sincerity when under pressure. American debates have been of varying quality, and the rules of engagement have differed from election to election. Some have almost certainly made a difference to the outcome (e.g. Kennedy v Nixon, in 1960), so that it is crucial for candidates to avoid mistakes. Errors have been made and some have been costly. President Ford committed an infamous gaffe and exposed his ignorance in 1976 when – at a time when the Cold War was still very much a part of the global scene – he said that Poland was not then under Soviet domination. By contrast, other candidates have used debates to their advantage. Whereas George Bush froze in front of the cameras in 1992 and Dole in 1996 similarly lumbered in discomfort, their opponent, Bill Clinton, was at home, using body language and eye contact to engage the viewer. George W. Bush also benefited from the debates, his relaxed manner contrasting markedly with the more aggressive style adopted by Gore. It was widely anticipated that he might suffer at the hands of the experienced Democrat who was better versed on policy issues. But in the event, simply by his avoidance of potentially costly mistakes, he benefited from the contests.

*Party broadcasts*

British politicians have a means of communicating with the electorate which is unknown in America, the Party Political Broadcast (PPB). At election time, Party Election Broadcasts (PEBs) are allocated to all parties who put up at least 70 candidates, the exact number depending on the number of votes received at the last election. The early ones were very amateurish, but after 1959 a new professionalism crept in. People who worked on PEBs were more skilled in the media, and occasionally 'stars' were brought in to lend support and add a touch of glamour. In the 1980s and 1990s, PPBs and PEBs developed into something more like their present form, often using music and landscapes effectively as in the 1987 **Kinnock – The Movie** broadcast, directed by an established professional film director, Hugh Hudson, who had been responsible for the highly successful film *Chariots of Fire*.

**Kinnock – The Movie**

Neil and Glenys Kinnock were portrayed strolling hand-in-hand over the Welsh hills towards a headland, to the accompaniment of Brahms First Symphony and soaring seagulls overhead. The broadcast had a strong script, depicting Kinnock in a range of favourable settings which showed his 'strength' and also his commitment to 'decent' community values. It was a high-spot of the 1987 campaign.

The trend has been for broadcasts to get shorter, more akin to American political advertisements. The Conservatives have often used less than their allocated time in recent years, in the knowledge that a brief slot can make catchy and memorable points. In 2001, none ran to more than five minutes; some were less than three. Labour's broadcasts were more celebratory in tone, with broadcasts about the 'real heroes who are building the fortune of Britain' (nurses, teachers and police officers, among them) in the 'new Britain', coupled with dire warnings of what might happen to the public services should their opponents return to power. Conservative ones were very negative in tone, often employing dark, menacing images. A part of the first broadcast dealt with crime, its approach being reminiscent of an American TV advert used by an 'independent' Bush-supporting PAC in 1988 against Michael Dukakis. Others depicted scary visions of further life under Labour.

At best, such broadcasts are polished pieces of film, and interested voters may be influenced by those that are well done. The professionalism, emotionalism and negativity of many others is very reminiscent of American techniques. Some evidence suggests that viewers often switch off or are bored by broadcasts, especially those between election campaigns.

*Political advertisements*

Whereas election broadcasts in Britain are strictly controlled, there are no such restrictions in America. A candidate may spend as much as he or she wished to on paid television time. Adverts place greater emphasis on candidates

themselves rather than their party label. Those who make them are concerned to portray their candidate in a flattering light and to stress the demerits of their opponents.

American political adverts are overwhelmingly negative, for research has suggested that this is the most effective approach. Consumers can take in only so much information at any one time and it is easier to implant a negative message than a positive one in a brief broadcast. This is why it tends to go for the jugular and expose deficiencies in the moral character of an opponent. Often, they are used to attack an opponent's financial wheeling and dealing or to remind voters of personal weaknesses, perhaps in a back-handed way. In Tennessee, a candidate was congratulated for 'kicking [his] chemical dependency'.

Sometimes, adverts are longer portrayals, dwelling on the personal assets of the candidate. Television is good at handling personalities and telling stories, features which were combined in the 'Ron and Nancy' weepie in 1984 and the 'Man from Hope' film about Bill Clinton and his family eight years later. The former is thought to have provided the model for the 'Kinnock – The Movie' election broadcast used so effectively by Labour in 1987.

**Television as a means of communication**

The quality of news and current affairs programming matters for the public and the politicians. Ideally, coverage will be fair, balanced and interesting, straightforward and accessible for those who want a brief review and clear and comprehensive for those seeking a more detailed understanding. For many people, watching a news bulletin or reading a tabloid newspaper gives them as much information as they require. Others want more searching analysis and reflective comment to enable them to understand the background story behind the news.

Television has weaknesses as a source of political education, some of which relate to the need for balance and impartiality. In interviews with leading TV personalities it is sometimes difficult for politicians to get their views across for their replies can be cut off prematurely or they may not be given a chance to provide an adequate answer. Sometimes a sharp intervention by the chairman of a discussion is necessary to get a response from professional politicians who are skilled at being evasive, but on occasion the interview can be dominated by the personality of the interviewer more than by the answer being attempted.

Furthermore, there is a need for speed and brevity on television, and great issues are sometimes not handled at length, arguments are left unexplored and to keep programmes alive and entertaining they can be superficial and trivial. In-depth analysis – how events came to be – is often lacking. Yet at best

discussion can be profound, elucidating the arguments on key issues and exploring the backgrounds of incidents and decisions.

Over the last decade, there has been some disquiet about the standard of news and current affairs coverage on television. Several allegations have been made, notably that:

- Television news was often reduced to the role of running other people's stories. Major issues often derived more from what was gathered from the newspapers than from original research undertaken by a television news operation. Good investigation by TV journalists was increasingly a rarity.
- The content and presentation of too many stories were dictated by the ploys of spin doctors and media experts who know how to manage the news. What resulted was an obsession with sound-bites and picture opportunities, whilst issues were neglected. As President Jimmy Carter once lamented: 'The peripheral aspects become the headlines, but the basic essence of what you stand for and what you hope to accomplish is never reported'.
- Though there were more and more bulletins on different stations and at different times of the day, most national coverage repeated the same stories about the same issues and the same people. The manner of presentation might vary and the information was sometimes regurgitated with a slightly differing slant – depending on the news editor involved – but this did not amount to genuine choice. The range of topics which made the agenda was too narrow.

**An American insight**

Walter Cronkite, a distinguished American newsman, has reviewed his experiences of television journalism in his autobiography, *A Reporter's Life*. Having praised the way in which television can 'lift the floor of knowledge' for those who know very little about politics, he argues that it can 'lower the ceiling' for the majority. He particularly regrets the trend towards sound-bite journalism:

> **The sheer volume of television news is ridiculously small. The number of words spoken in a half-hour broadcast rarely equals the number of words on two-thirds of a standard newspaper page. That is not enough to cover the whole day's major events. Compression of facts, foreshortened arguments, the elimination of extenuating explanation – all are dictated by TV's restrictive frame and all distort, to some degree, the news on television . . .**
>
> **The TV correspondent as well as his or her subjects is a victim of this compression. With inadequate time to present a coherent report, the correspondent seems to craft a final summary sentence that might make some sense of the preceding gibberish. This is hard to do without coming to a single point of view – and a one line editorial is born . . . Sound-bite journalism simply isn't good enough to serve the people in our national elections.**

An extract published in *The Guardian*, 27 January 1997.

## The effects of the media

The effects of television on politics and the electoral process cover three main aspects: the effects on elections and electioneering, the effects on political leaders and candidates, and the effects on the opinions of the electorate.

### Elections and electioneering

Today, the media, especially television, largely determine the form of election campaigns. They have replaced political meetings in importance, to the extent that today any large meetings are relayed on television and geared to its needs. Each news bulletin accords coverage of the main politicians, so that the main meetings are stage-managed proceedings timed for maximum television coverage, and sound-bites are delivered to grab the headlines.

Bowler and Farrell have illustrated the extent to which these trends are common to all democracies. Television is the main tool for campaigning, to the extent that 'free elections in a modern democracy would easily collapse if the mass media . . . were to ignore election campaigning'. Television has had its effect at the local level. The roots of party activity are atrophying, and canvassing and pamphleteering are less in evidence. As the same writers point out: 'Local electioneering has been overtaken by the nationalisation of the campaign and the growth of the mass media'.[9]

The media has another role in connection with the conduct of elections. Increasingly, they help to set the agenda for the campaign. As we have seen, journalists – or, more particularly, their editors – determine the issues they consider to be worthy of investigation and follow-up reporting and commentary. Some issues are kept in the forefront of the public mind (in Britain, sleaze in 1997), whereas other – perhaps more meaty ones – may be neglected.

The style of campaigning is much influenced by television. In America, electioneering is more candidate-centred (see pp. 289–90), so that candidates rather than parties seek to gain popular approval and support. In Britain, party counts for more, but there is still an infatuation with personalities. Although party managers may still be interviewed and seek to use the medium to promote the party cause, it is the candidate who is the focus of media attention. They and their team of consultants are constantly on the look out for opportunities to ensure that they gain favourable coverage and are vigilant in watching out for any signs of bias against them. They attempt **'management' of the news**.

**news management**
The techniques used by politicians and their advisers to control the information given to the media.

Managing the media involves ensuring that journalist get the right stories (information slanted to their particular viewpoint) backed up with good

pictures. It can range from crude political arm-twisting to more subtle means. Advisers dream up sound-bites and photo-opportunities, and use their spin-doctors to put across an appropriate line (see box on p. 259). They try to book interviews with 'softer' interviewers, rather than undergo a potentially damaging interrogation. They seek to control the agenda, sticking to themes on which they are strong and avoiding (or downplaying) embarrassing issues.

Political consultancy is an area that has mushroomed. According to Rees, there are at least some 10,000 political consultants in the United States. He quotes one Democrat consultant as saying: 'In America today, without good professional help, if you're running against a person who has professional help, you have virtually no chance of being elected'.[10] These media advisers understand the way in which television works and what their candidate needs to do to create the right impression. They know that television is not just another channel of communication. It has 'changed the very way it has become necessary to communicate, and thus the very way it has become necessary to formulate political discourse'. Television has made the 'look' of a politician vital. When we think of Thatcher, Major and Blair or Reagan, Clinton and George W. Bush, it is their image, how they look on television, which is the main memory. Television is a medium in which attractive people flourish. Conventional good looks are an advantage; fatness or baldness quite the opposite.

Politicians need to be acceptable to the ear, as well as to the eye. Television has actually changed what is said, as well as how it is said. The form of debate is influenced by the professional persuaders. As we have seen, politicians increasingly talk in memorable sound-bites. The emphasis of their discourse is on broad themes, the phrases being simple and often repeated. Frequently their language is couched in emotional terms. If the message can be illustrated by a suitable picture, so much the better.

### Party leaders and candidates

Today, the tendency of journalists in the media is to presidentialise our election coverage and do less than justice to the issues involved, for, as Negrine observes, there is an 'infatuation with personalities and, in particular, political leaders'.[11] Indeed, Foley notes that outside of an election period party leaders account for one-third of the time allocated to politicians in news coverage; during elections, the figures rises to half.[12] This being the case, parties feel that they must choose politicians who are 'good on television'. Unsurprisingly, politicians are highly sensitive to the way in which their behaviour and actions are reported. They realise that television, in particular, can do them great damage. It also provides them with a remarkable opportunity to influence opinion.

**THE TERMINOLOGY OF MODERN ELECTIONS**

**Photo-opportunities**

Carefully stage-managed episodes in which the leading figure is set against a particular background, perhaps to demonstrate concern for the area or its industry. Ronald Reagan favoured the image of the all-American cowboy, riding on horseback into the sunset, thereby conjuring in the mind of the electors an image of the great outdoors as part of the wholesome American dream. Tony Blair has sometimes been photographed with footballers and their managers, as when he had a heading encounter with Kevin Keegan or met members of the England team prior to the World Cup finals in Korea and Japan. Such occasions have a humanising effect, suggesting that the candidate is a 'regular guy', someone just like 'ordinary people'.

**Sound-bites**

Short sayings, full of concentrated meaning, which consists of a few easily remembered words, and yet convey a particular message. A well-known Reagan sound-bite was 'You ain't seen nothin' yet'. George Bush told voters to 'Read my lips. No new taxes', a slogan which backfired when, as President, he found himself supporting higher taxation. The Rev. Jesse Jackson (a charismatic, African-American and liberal Democratic politician) is a master of 'soundbitese'. Recognising that he will get perhaps 15 seconds on a news bulletin, he can summarise his argument in an exciting epigram. His rhyming sound-bite 'we're going to have demonstrations without hesitation and jail without bail' was a more memorable and catchy way of saying that 'we are not going to spend a long time deciding whether to have a demonstration. We are willing to go to jail for our cause and will not accept bail'. In Britain, the best-known sound-bite was that used by Tony Blair before, during and after the 1997 election: 'Tough on crime, tough on the causes of crime'.

Politicians on either side of the Atlantic have been forced to acquire new techniques of communication. When politicians addressed large crowds 'on the stump', the quality of oratory was all-important. Dramatic, expansive gestures were in vogue. Television requires a different, quieter tone. As Hague and Harrop explain: '[In the age of broadcasting] the task is to converse rather than to deliver a speech; to talk to the millions as though they were individuals'.[13] Some politicians have excelled in developing their technique, among them Franklin Roosevelt, whose folksy 'fireside chats' from the White House gave the American people renewed hope in the days of the Great Depression and after.

America has led the way in selling its public figures. Three of them have been 'naturals' for television, just as Franklin Roosevelt was for radio. John F. Kennedy portrayed an image of youth and glamour, and lifted the horizons of many Americans as he offered them a vision of 'new frontiers'. Ronald Reagan,

The use of soundbites by politicians is a recognition of the importance of the television in political affairs. In the limited time available for political coverage, they need to make maximum impact. Moreover, they know that the attention span of the voters – used as they are to the impact of pictures in this visual medium – is in many cases limited. Their response is to employ a brief, catchy statement which reduces complex issues into an easily memorable slogan. When Michael Howard (the Conservative Home Secretary in the Major government), wanted to convey the idea that ministers were taking a tough line in dealing with crime, by using imprisonment as a main means of deterrence and punishment, his easy catchphrase was 'Prison works'.

**Spin-doctors**

Spin-doctors are part of the media team, their task being to change the way the public perceive some happening, or to alter their expectations of what might occur. They try to put a favourable gloss on information and events. Spin has become an accepted feature of campaigns in the USA. The term derives from the spin given to a ball in various sports, to make it go in a direction which confuses the opponent.

Spin-doctors for candidates and parties may 'talk down' their own chances of success or build up those of an opponent. The idea of spin came from the United States and takes many forms, ranging from damage limitation (the management of things already out of control, in such a way as to prevent any further deterioration) to tornado spin (the attempt to create interest in something which is not inherently fascinating). Labour's use of spinning has been much criticised since 1997, because its alleged tendency to be 'economical with the *actualite*' encourages people to disbelieve what governmental spokespersons are saying.

a trained actor, looked good and sounded sincere. Known as 'the great communicator', he had the gift of making people trust in him. Using a teleprompter (the first political leader to do so), he was able to speak directly to his audience, in tones to which they could warm. His advisers presented him as the embodiment of the American Dream; he was an individualist who spoke in language which appealed to their hearts.

Bill Clinton was effective in speaking directly to the viewers, and was on occasion able to use television to launch his come-back after going through a bad patch. His style was in any case suited to the modern era, but he was also well-served by his script-writers. They were said to spend much time in his company, and as a result were able to incorporate words and phrases which he used in his private conversation. By so doing, they were able to convey the character of the person, in this case one who does not favour ornate rhetoric but likes to tell his story in a relaxed, conversational style.

In Britain, Harold Macmillan and Harold Wilson were able television performers, each having something of the actor in their personality and possessing characteristics that could make them seem amiable and interesting. Peter Hennessy has pointed out that Wilson was at first an uninspired communicator, prone to jerky movements with his right arm. But then he got a pipe and solved his problem. He 'changed the nature of the discourse, making it relaxed and conversational, but recognised that it is the well-fashioned phrase and sentence which will glow and be remembered'.[14] In Tony Blair, Labour found another man appropriate for the television age. He has revealed his mastery of the medium in a variety of circumstances, as in the tribute he paid on the death of Princess Diana, his appearance with Des O'Connor, and his sofa conversation with Richard and Judy on ITV.

Appearance as well as voice is important. Macmillan saw the need to change his image from that of a tweedy old Tory to an elegant Edwardian gent; Wilson carried a spare, carefully pressed suit; and of Margaret Thatcher it was observed that 'every part of her had been transformed, her teeth, her nose I suspect and her eyebrows'. The same writer, Peter Mandelson (a former TV producer who became a media/image adviser for the Labour Party, prior to becoming an MP and Cabinet minister), has noted that:

> **TV does more to make or break a politician than any other medium. It is the voter's key source for forming impressions of politicians. They are looking for good judgement, for warmth, for an understanding of people's concerns. That can only be demonstrated on television.**[15]

'Getting it right' does matter, as Sir Alec Douglas-Home (a former Tory Prime Minister) recognised before his death. Having been undermined by the medium – which made him look rather drawn and ill-at-ease, with his glasses too far down his nose and his face and head very skull-shaped – he admitted that he 'was bored by the whole business of presentation as far as television was concerned because I think television is bound to be superficial. I was wrong'. Other political leaders – from Ted Heath to Gerald Ford and Michael Foot to the elder George Bush – have learned that television is a two-edged sword. For the telegenic politician it presents an enormous opportunity, but for those who do not look or sound good it can be damaging. On the one hand, it exposes their limitations; on the other, it may enhance the stature of those around them, who may be potential rivals.

### The effects of television on the opinions of the voters

Given the time many people spend viewing and their constant exposure to a mass of information in news bulletins and current affairs/discussion programmes, it would be surprising if there was no effect on the attitudes and judgements of the electorate. At the very least, electors would be expected to know more about topics on which they already had some knowledge, and to

become informed about ones with which they were previously unfamiliar. At election time, one would expect them to have a heightened awareness of key issues. Indeed, some people tend to become mini-pundits on the issues of the day, having watched a programme the night before. One might expect increased interest, as well.

The real – as opposed to the imagined – effects of the mass media on popular attitudes are difficult to assess. They may be very different on different people. Viewers may spend hours watching the television or reading a newspaper, but this does not necessarily tell us that either or both are their main sources of information. There are many possible ways of obtaining knowledge, and it is impossible to separate that which has been derived from the media from conversations at the workplace or that which has been accumulated from elsewhere. Life is a continuing learning experience, in which knowledge and attitudes are liable to be influenced at many points in a person's lifetime.

The task of determining media influence is the greater because there are so many different forms of media, and to distinguish between the effects caused by one medium rather than another is near impossible. In developing their political attitudes, people might be influenced by television, radio, newspapers or quality journals, amongst other sources. It may more simply be an eye-catching poster which makes the greatest impression on them.

There have been four main theories concerning the study of the effects of the media on people's attitudes and conduct.

*1 The hypodermic theory*

Back in the 1930s, it was easy to think in terms of the importance of propaganda. The experience of the dictatorships, particularly Nazi Germany, led people to assume that the media must have a considerable impact, for Goebbels and others like him were making so much use of persuasive techniques. Against this background, some political scientists suggested that the message carried by the media was like a 'magic bullet' or hypodermic syringe which, on contact with the audience, affected it in a uniform way. People soaked up the information they were given, rather as a sponge absorbs water.

The survey evidence to substantiate such findings was lacking. In any case, the effect of propaganda in a totalitarian regime was likely to be infinitely greater than in a liberal democracy such as America in which people could think, act and react under less threatening conditions.

*2 The reinforcement theory*

When researchers such as Paul Lazarsfeld looked for similar evidence of the impact of the media in postwar America, they were unable to find it. Using

more modern and scientific techniques of investigation, Lazarsfeld found that there was no evidence to substantiate the idea of a significant effect. He first examined radio, and found no evidence of a decisive influence; indeed, 'it was the change of opinion which determined whether people listened, rather than their listening determining their change of opinion'.

Using the 1948 presidential election as a case-study, Lazarsfeld's findings showed that few people changed their vote in the campaign, and that those who did so were as likely to cite discussions with relatives, friends and colleagues at work as the major reason rather than television or newspapers.[16] This led Lazarsfeld to expound the **minimum effects** model of media influence, which recognised that knowledge may increase and attitudes may become clearer in a campaign, but that voting behaviour itself was little influenced by television. The reason for this was the **selective exposure theory**, according to which listeners and viewers filtered out and suppressed unwelcome messages while paying particular attention to those they liked. The idea was that television acts primarily as a means of reinforcement rather than fundamental change. People exposed themselves to communications with which they were likely to agree, and tended to remember only information which coincided with their own outlook.

*3 The agenda-setting theory*

Coverage of the effects of the media moved on from the 'reinforcement' phase to the 'agenda-setting' one, according to which the media achieve their aim of influencing people by more subtle means. They can't directly tell people what to think, but they can tell them what to think about. They influence the public by determining what is shown or read, and many of the viewers/readers come to accept what is offered as a representation of the main things that are really happening.

Television does help to set the agenda for discussion. Journalists (or more particularly their editors) and producers of television and radio programmes decide on what they consider to be the key issues worthy of investigation, follow-up reporting and commentary. If they choose to highlight the character of a candidate, the budget deficit or the problems of the ghettos, then these may well become influential factors in shaping the image which people have of personalities or events.

*4 The independent effect theory*

A fourth model is in vogue today. The 'independent effect theory' is now sometimes advocated by sociologists on both sides of the Atlantic. This suggests that the media do have an effect on public attitudes, even if those effects are difficult to monitor and are variable in their impact. The effects may

be negative – e.g. by ignoring certain candidates, the media make people believe that they are not important or do not exist – and may have small-scale and short-term influence, but it is naive to write off the power of the media.

We now have much greater experience of the media, and in particular are more familiar with the age of television. Hence, it seems to be only common sense to assume that the influence of the media must be greater than has been allowed for in the recent past. In particular, what has changed in the last generation is that the traditional identification of many Americans with a particular party has become less firm. It is now a commonplace to speak of declining voter-partisanship. If people are more receptive to a change of mind, it seems reasonable to suggest that the media, especially television, may have a greater effect than ever before on their attitudes and voting. There are more votes 'up for grabs'.

During a presidential or congressional election campaign, the elector today faces a huge amount of material from the mass media, including news bulletins, discussion programmes, talk shows and debates between the candidates. With political advertising on television, as well as posters, pamphlets and press advertisements, there certainly is a barrage of information available. It is hard to believe that such saturation does not have an impact. At the very least, people ought to be more fully informed than ever before, even if their attitudes are not altered – but this too may happen over a period of time.

The parties' professional advisers clearly think that television has a significant impact. They place much emphasis on ensuring that the campaign is appropriate for the medium, carefully packaging the product, and portraying their candidate in his or her best light. But the truth is that no one really knows what the effects are and different research points to different conclusions. People react in several ways. Some are partisans who seek to back up their beliefs with examples derived from the programmes they view; others are monitors genuinely seeking information with which to make up their minds. There are also those who are merely passive spectators watching out of apathy or without great commitment. In other words, it is misleading to speak of the impact of the media as though this was the same impact on all groups in the population. The effects of TV exposure may be entirely different on such categories as the young and the old, the employed and the unemployed. There are many effects on many different people.

## Televised politics in Britain and the USA compared: the Americanisation of British politics?

Britain has in many ways learnt from the American experience. Election campaigners have visited the United States and sometimes participated in

elections there. Inevitably, their findings have been relayed to their colleagues back home. In addition, people in Britain see pictures of presidential electioneering, and there has often been discussion in the media of the techniques employed. As a result, America has been a useful source of innovation in British campaign techniques. Just as the Conservatives under Margaret Thatcher absorbed a lot from the Reagan experience in the mid–late 1980s, so too the Labour Party was keen to derive insights from the success of the Democrat, Bill Clinton, in 1992 and again in 1996.

In recent years, there has been an increasing British obsession with walkabouts, photo-opportunities and other **pseudo-events** created for the media. In the 1980s and 1990s, there have been several examples of the Americanisation of politics at work, not least in the style of some party broadcasts (Kinnock – The Movie, **Jennifer's Ear** and others), and in the **Sheffield Rally**, a triumphalist occasion very reminiscent of the American convention.

Yet there are differences and some safeguards. In Britain, we are electing a party rather than just one person, and politics is not about personality alone. The in-depth interview provides a kind of antidote to the dangers of shallow but media-friendly leaders being chosen, for their personal qualities come under heavy scrutiny and in the in-depth Sunday lunchtime type of programme policy deficiencies can be much exposed. We also can now see our representatives in action in the House of Commons, and Question Time at least is an institution which shows those in power being forced to defend their position, even if it does little to inform people of the issues. The interviews conducted in the election in *Election Call* are a reminder of how leading figures can be put on the spot by skilful members of the public who can unsettle their composure.

But most people do not watch such encounters, and the likelihood is that those people who use television the most to obtain their information may be the very people who are least discerning and able to come to a reasonable conclusion

**pseudo-events**

Events such as press conferences or photo-opportunities which would not take place were it not for the TV coverage they attract. Their use illustrates the importance of 'news management' by political consultants, to ensure that the best impression of the party or candidate is provided.

**Jennifer's Ear**

A 1992 Labour broadcast, the story of two girls and their similar problem of 'glue ear'. The parents of one girl could afford private treatment. The other girl, Jennifer, was reliant on the National Health Service to remedy the affliction. The issue at stake – the funding of the health service – was later lost in a series of revelations, explanations and denials. But the approach of the programme was very American, professionally accomplished and strong on emotion and with the added-extra ingredient of a sickly child. Ultimately it backfired, and failed in its purpose.

**Sheffield Rally**

A slick, visually striking, stage-managed, glitz and glamour Labour election gathering (1992), which treated its characters more as movie stars than as politicians striving for office. Some people did not like the display of fervour which had overtones of Hitler's Nuremberg rallies in prewar Germany.

based on knowledge. They probably don't read other sources and therefore what they see and hear has a potent effect on the least sophisticated electors.

Party broadcasts instead of political advertisements, free air-time, vigilant journalists, and politicians more prepared to answer questions about their proposals, help to differentiate us from US experience in certain respects, and are some kind of protection against our adopting the worst aspects of American electioneering methods into Britain. Yet as we have seen, the party broadcasts themselves have to some degree 'gone American' in style and form.

It may be that on this side of the Atlantic we are less susceptible to the excesses of emotionalism and negative campaigning that beset American politics. In 1992, in different ways, Jennifer's Ear and the Sheffield Rally could be said to have backfired. In the long term, they may even be seen as the time when British politics diverted from the path pursued on the American scene, or at least held back from its worst excesses.

**A note on the Internet**

In the last few years, the Internet has been one of the most discussed means of communication. Partly this is because it allows the diffusion of several kinds of data, images, speeches, text and video. The level of interest also reflects the speed with which the Internet has been adopted across the world. Nearly half of the world's users are in the United States, where regular use has been considerably higher than in Britain: 54 per cent as against 43 per cent. One study has calculated the number of years from inception for new media to reach 50m households in the USA: radio 38, television 13, cable 10, and internet 5 (estimate for 1995–2000). (Quoted by Hague and Harrop[17].)

Enthusiasts for the Internet often claim that eventually it will become a key source of political information, as voters seek out news and comment on personalities and issues. Candidates and parties have responded to the challenge it presents, spending vast sums on creating web sites and e-mail address lists. The impact of such activity is as yet hard to assess. The proportion of the electorate with regular access to the Internet who use it for political purposes is small but growing, more concentrated among younger and more educated voters. There is little indication that it has as yet had much impact on undecided voters.

The Internet was used by candidates and their campaign managers in the 2000 and 2001 national elections. In America, Republican John McCain employed it as an effective means of raising money, Bush used it as the place to announce his financial backers, and in some battleground states supporters of Gore and Nader used it as a vehicle via which they could attempt to engage in mutually beneficial tactical voting.

At this stage, the Internet poses no serious threat to the more established media. Indeed, newspaper and television companies are the main providers of political information on web sites. It is, however, becoming more important as a campaigning tool and in both America and Britain major candidates and parties see it as a suitable place to outline their background, present policy positions and provide instructions for making on-line contributions.