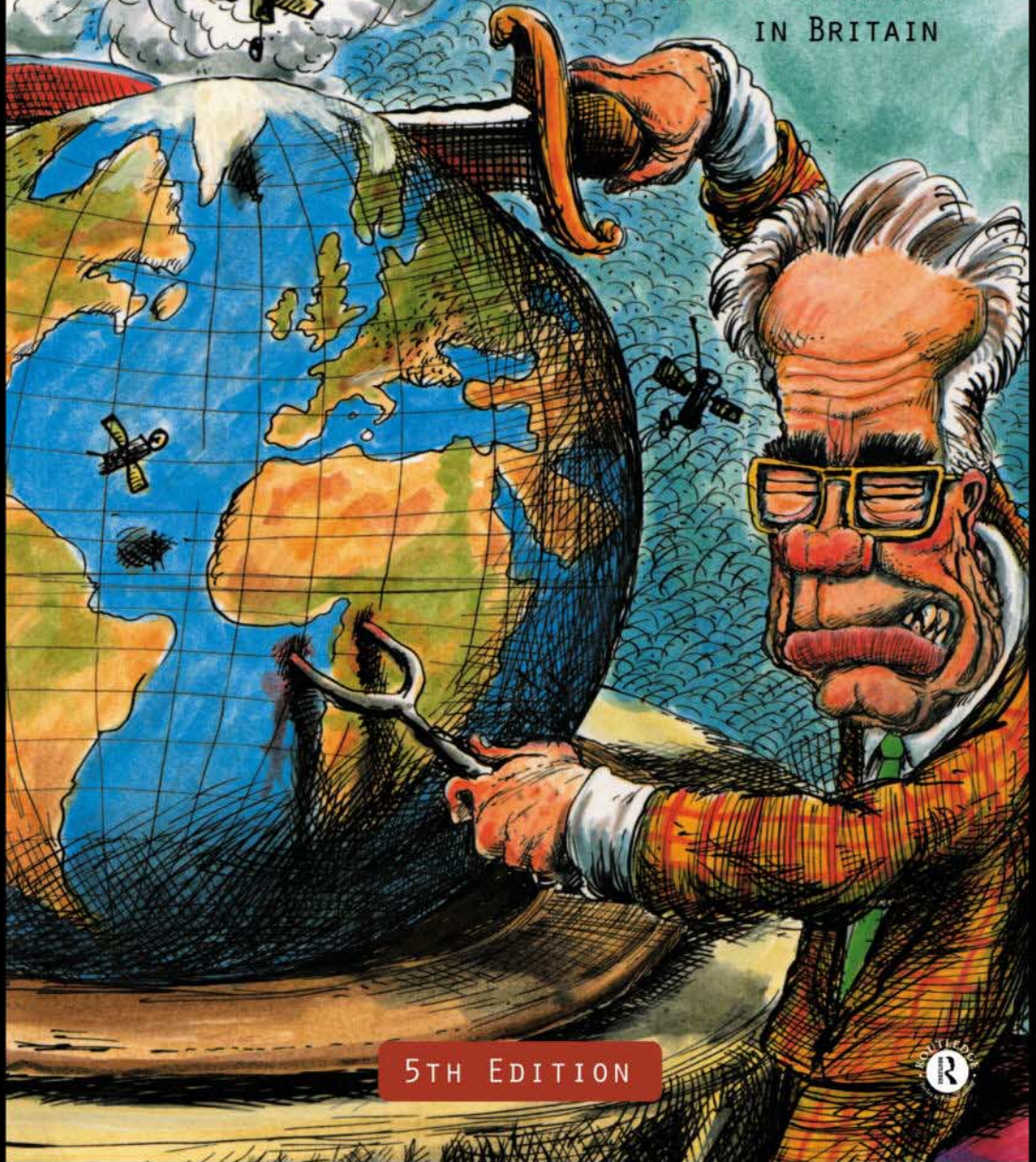


James Curran and Jean Seaton

# Power *WITHOUT* Responsibility

THE PRESS AND BROADCASTING  
IN BRITAIN



5TH EDITION



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# POWER WITHOUT RESPONSIBILITY

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*Power Without Responsibility* is a classic and authoritative introduction to the history, sociology, theory and politics of the media in Britain. It has become required reading for students and teachers of media and communication studies and is an essential guide for all those involved in the production and consumption of the media.

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**James Curran** is Professor of Communications at Goldsmiths College, University of London. **Jean Seaton** is Quintin Hogg Research Fellow and Reader in Communications at the Centre for Communication and Information Studies at the University of Westminster.

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*Journal of Educational Television*

# POWER WITHOUT RESPONSIBILITY

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The press and  
broadcasting  
in Britain

Fifth edition

*James Curran and Jean Seaton*



London and New York

To Albert and Joan Seaton,  
and the memory of  
Geoffrey and Nancie Curran

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Although this book is very much a joint effort there has been some division of labour. Thus Jean Seaton has concentrated on broadcasting and the sociology of the mass media (chapters 8–17 and 19), and James Curran on the history and political theory of the press (chapters 1–7, 18, 21 and 22). However in some parts of the book it is impossible to say where the work of one author ends and that of the other begins.

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## *Preface to the fifth edition*

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Is public service broadcasting dead? Or not? Has the BBC's capacity to do exciting and important things been preserved or fatally weakened by permanent managerial revolution? Is the story of the BBC in the last decade representative of many British institutions at a critical moment and what should we expect of the future? Has the rise of the global media moguls undermined the historic ties between the press and the Conservative Party? How far does the simple division between left and right still adequately describe the politics of the media? How have the growing powers of a Ministry of Culture (reassuringly disguised as National Heritage) and the rise of the European state affected public regulation of the media? Are media industries actually 'globalized' in the way fashionable theories assert?

These are some of the questions addressed in this comprehensively updated edition. It contains four new, originally researched chapters including an overview of broadcasting in the 1980s and 1990s, a sceptical assessment of globalization orthodoxy, a new summary of debate about media policy, and what is in effect a personal manifesto for media reform during the next five years. In addition, the book has been substantially revised to take account of developments in press and journalism research, modifications of the liberal theory of press freedom and the radical right's attempt to introduce a novel consistency in media policy based on the market.



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## *Introduction*

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This book is about the press, broadcasting, and politics. It argues that the influence of the media has been immense – on institutions, the conduct of affairs, and the way in which people think and act politically. It argues that the mass media and mass politics have inspired, reflected, and shaped each other more than has commonly been realized. It also argues that despite an apparent increase in sources of information, we need to be deeply concerned about how the public get to know about and understand politics. News and news values are becoming more narrow, more sensational, and more trivialized.

The power of the press and broadcasting has often been obscured. Thus, for example, the view that the British Press is one of the great instruments of liberty, an independent fourth estate, the vital defender of public interests, is a central part of our political culture. Yet, as will be shown, this is a very modern theory which has more than an element of special pleading. The theory was produced to justify those who created the press and whose interests it largely served. This does not mean that newspapers, television, and radio have generally been instruments of crude propaganda: rather that the media are political actors in their own right.

It is equally mistaken to believe that the press and broadcasting simply reflect contemporary political forces. In the first place, some groups – stronger, richer, and with better access – are always able to secure more attention than others. Secondly, the media do have some political autonomy. Thus the radical press was relatively strong in 1860, when the labour movement was divided and defeated. Just before the First World War, on the other hand, an increasingly powerful working class had few radical newspapers to support it. In contrast, there have been other times when developments in the media have been more closely related to social moods. During the 1960s a new boldness in television seemed to be connected with a rapid change in public mores. Thus the relationship between the media and society has varied. In contrast, during the late 1980s the media, competing savagely for audiences, became more concerned with profit and less concerned with content than in an

earlier period. Indeed this variety is the source of the power which the press and broadcasting may wield. If the media merely mirrored events then they would have little effect on them.

Yet the media are not a force in themselves. Editors and producers – in Britain as elsewhere – are blamed for many things: from race riots to dress fashions, from football hooliganism to the fall of governments. But this scapegoating generally mistakes a catalyst, or even a symptom, for a cause: investing the media with a magical importance they do not possess.

With the extension of the franchise the role of the press changed. Arguably the popular press, together with the mass membership party, helped to produce a predictable electorate. More recently television has brought political information to a new section of the population. Yet until recently broadcasting was obliged to balance political views. It also developed a style and a rhetoric which were in themselves anti-partisan, and indeed anti-party. As broadcasting became the dominant source of political knowledge, these constraints must have affected popular understanding and involvement in politics.

Now, with the growth of video, cable, and satellite technologies, and the increase of channels, the conventions of scheduling programmes built up over sixty years may be becoming redundant. The capacity of broadcasting to attract a mass, nation-wide audience regularly for any particular programme, or indeed any kind of programme, may disappear. In particular, the television industry has begun to be less special, less privileged perhaps, run more for its shareholders and less for the public. Indeed its audiences are now seen as consumers, and less often as citizens. Every previous change in the pattern of communications has had important political consequences. So will this revolution, even though its effects are still a matter for speculation.

The press was the arena of a major political struggle during the nineteenth century. Different classes contended not only for the right to express their own causes and interests but also to suppress other views. The newspapers we have today, and their way of dealing with politics, are a product of that competition. The battle was political. Yet in the end economic pressures were far more effective in limiting the variety of expression than any direct censorship. The market promoted some interests, but at the expense of others.

The control of broadcasting in Britain was not decided by the same kind of political confrontation which had marked the history of newspapers. Although in all countries the state has determined who can broadcast, the conditions of this right have varied enormously. In some liberal democracies broadcasting has been directly controlled, either by government or by a coalition of political parties. In others, private enterprise and the profit motive have been dominating forces. In Britain broadcasting has had some protection from market pressures, and has claimed political independence. These traditions may alter under the impact of the new technologies. Increasingly, the markets for the media are international and global: the role of national media is changing.

The first objective of the media has always been to attract an audience. Hence press and broadcasting have sought to provide instantly appreciable material that is loosely described as 'entertainment'. Some people have regarded entertainment as of little social or political importance. Others have accorded it a sinister role: as a device to numb the public into political acquiescence. It is argued here that such views need to be reconsidered: entertainment is important, and it always has political consequences.

The assumptions which underlie the conduct of the press and broadcasting also need to be reassessed. Thus it is widely believed that press freedom exists because anyone who does not find his views expressed has the right to start his own newspaper. In practice very few can exercise this right. It might be argued that the same is true of political parties. However, while it may not be practical for an individual or minority group to start a new mass political organization, it is possible to enter and influence existing parties to a far greater extent than is the case with newspapers.

In the same way broadcasters today are less confident than in the past of asserting their omniscient appreciation of the public good. Rather they argue that they attempt to reflect competing interests, interpreting attacks from both left and right as evidence that they are arriving at a proper balance of views. But many of the interests and groups which are now excluded from access to broadcasting fall outside such conventional political definitions. Indeed it will be argued that accuracy, precision, and veracity should not be confused with independence. It is rarely indicated to the public that objectivity is different from the equality of competition between selected opponents.

There is one common view that the role of the media has always been the same. The press and broadcasting have always exaggerated, distorted, and suppressed. Thus, it has been suggested, they have had little overall effect on political life. The trouble with this view, however, is that the role of the press and broadcasting has changed. Arguably the power of the media has increased remarkably in the last fifty years. There are fewer alternative sources of information, while the control of the media has become concentrated in ever fewer hands. At the same time the press and broadcasting have become less accountable. The public means of monitoring performance is wholly incapable of coping with growth and technological change in increasingly complex industries. This book is, however, based on a ridiculously optimistic view of the British media. It assumes that it is possible to do something by government regulation to make newspapers and broadcasting, not slicker and richer, but better.

Of course, such a notion is well known to be absurd. There are people (government ministers, for instance) who think that the worst excesses of the media, as of trade unions, should be curbed. There are others (shadow ministers, for instance) who look for a means to correct political bias. There are very few people, apart from the occasional idealistic journalist, who see a problem at all. On the one hand, action isn't considered necessary: Britain may have lost an empire, but many still assume that it has the best media in the world. On the other hand, any major interference is seen as a dangerous infringement of liberty.

There are other reformers who are concerned with constitutional change. But constitutional protection has not made the American media better. Indeed, the right of those with riches to claim 'freedom of speech' at the expense of other, poorer, voices is currently protected by American constitutional law. We need a freedom of information act, we may need constitutional reform. However, no one should assume that will get us media that perform better.

Thus this book concludes by suggesting that it is possible to discard irreverently the conventional wisdom, and start with contrary assumptions. That a rapidly changing industry needs to be guided. That something which daily intrudes into our lives in ever more sophisticated ways needs to be, itself, the subject of continual public surveillance. That the media interferes with us; therefore we have a right and a duty to interfere with the media. It is important that we begin to think more radically about the media, for the press and broadcasting exercise a massive power, but it is more than ever a power without responsibility.

# **Part I**

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## *Press history*

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## *Whig press history as political mythology*

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The orthodox interpretation of the development of the British press has remained unchanged for over a century. ‘The British press’, writes David Chaney, ‘is generally agreed to have attained its freedom around the middle of the nineteenth century.’<sup>1</sup> This view, first advanced in the pioneering Victorian histories of journalism, has been repeated uncritically ever since in histories of modern Britain and historical studies of the British press.

The winning of press freedom is attributed partly to a heroic struggle against the state. The key events in this struggle are generally said to be the abolition of the Court of Star Chamber in 1641, the ending of press licensing in 1694, Fox’s Libel Act, 1792, and the repeal of press taxation – the so-called ‘taxes on knowledge’ – in the period 1853–61. Only with the last of these reforms, it is claimed, did the press finally become free.

This landmark in the history of Britain is also held to be the product of the capitalist development of the press. Indeed, some researchers place greater emphasis on the market evolution of the press than on its legal emancipation. ‘The true censorship’, Professor Roach writes of the late Georgian press, ‘lay in the fact that the newspaper had not yet reached financial independence, and consequently depended on the administration or the parties.’ The growth of newspaper profits, largely from advertising, supposedly rescued the press from economic dependence on the state. This view has been succinctly restated by Ivon Asquith in a scholarly study of the early nineteenth-century press. ‘Since sales were inadequate to cover the costs of producing a paper’, he writes,

it was the growing income from advertising which provided the material base for the change of attitude from subservience to independence. . . . It is perhaps no exaggeration to say that the growth of advertising revenue was the most important single factor in enabling the press to emerge as the Fourth Estate of the realm.

Orthodox histories of the press, with their stress on the free market and legal emancipation as the foundation of press freedom, provide a powerful, mythological account with a contemporary moral. Thus, the legend of the advertiser as the midwife of press freedom is invoked by journalists on the left as well as on the right to justify the role of advertising in the press. ‘The dangerous dependence of newspapers on advertising’, wrote Francis Williams, a former editor of the Labour *Daily Herald*,

has often been the theme of newspaper reformers – usually from outside its ranks. But the daily press would never have come into existence as a force in public and social life if it had not been for the need of men of commerce to advertise. Only through the growth of advertising did the press achieve independence.

Similarly, journalists sometimes cite the historic struggle against state control of the press as grounds for opposing any legislative press reform. John Whale concludes, for example, a brief historical survey of the dismantling of state controls of the press with the warning that politicians are still seeking ‘indirect ways of bringing state power to bear on unsympathetic journalism’. The principal way this is being manifested, he cautions, is in proposals to curb concentration of press ownership.

But while Whig history is invoked to oppose change in the press, it is summoned as an ally to justify the fundamental reorganization of broadcasting. For instance, the Peacock Committee – appointed by the Thatcher government to investigate the funding of the BBC – retold the history of the dismantling of press censorship<sup>2</sup> as a prelude to arguing for the eventual removal of all broadcasting ‘censorship’. In effect, it deployed a particular view of newspaper history to press for the reconstruction of broadcasting along the deregulated, free market lines of print journalism.

The conventional history of the press thus has an ideological resonance for our own times. Part of its rhetorical force stems from the liberating role attributed to the press in the nineteenth century. According to the *New Cambridge Modern History*, financially independent newspapers became ‘great organs of the public mind’ which empowered the people and made governments accountable. The emergent, free press is also said to have made a vital contribution to Britain’s maturing democracy in the second half of the nineteenth century by becoming more responsible and providing the factual information needed for people to make balanced and informed political judgements. Even a Marxist like Raymond Williams noted with approval that after 1855 ‘most newspapers were able to drop their frantic pamphleteering’,<sup>3</sup> while the radical historian, Alan Lee, portrayed the late Victorian period as a ‘golden age’ of British journalism.

Agreement among historians is not total. There is a continuing debate about when newspapers became independent of political parties. A number of historians also express misgivings about the growing ‘commercialization’ of the press, and are sharply critical of the

first generation of press lords. But few contest the conventional wisdom, embalmed in a much acclaimed two-volume study by Stephen Koss, that there has been ‘a transition from official to popular control’ of the press during the modern period. Fewer still contest the central thesis of Whig press history that this ‘progress of the press’ was central to ‘the broadening of political liberty’.

What follows is a long overdue attempt to reappraise the standard interpretation of press history.<sup>4</sup> It will indicate the need not merely to re-examine critically the accepted view of the historical emergence of a ‘free’ press but to stand it on its head. The period around the middle of the nineteenth century, it will be argued, did not inaugurate a new era of press freedom and liberty: it introduced a new system of press censorship more effective than anything that had gone before. Market forces succeeded where legal repression had failed in conscripting the press to the social order.

### Notes

- 1 References have been kept to a minimum throughout the book but a select bibliography is provided at the end.
- 2 The Peacock Committee’s historical account is extremely simplistic, and ignores the revisionist interpretations advanced by historians of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century press.
- 3 R. Williams, *The Long Revolution* (Harmondsworth, Pelican, 1965), p. 218. For a later more critical assessment, see R. Williams, ‘The press and popular culture: an historical perspective’ in G. Boyce, J. Curran, and P. Wingate (eds), *Newspaper History* (London, Constable, 1978).
- 4 A number of important studies of early nineteenth-century working-class politics – notably by the Thompsons, Hollis, Wiener, and Epstein – provide evidence that, by implication at least, casts doubt on the conventional Whig thesis of the triumphant rise of a free press in mid-Victorian Britain. The wider implications of these studies for re-interpreting press history have been buried, however, because their focus is on early working-class struggles rather than the long-term development of journalism.

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## *The struggle for a free press*

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The remarkably resilient Whig interpretation of press history has been sustained by focusing attention upon mainstream commercial newspapers, while ignoring or downplaying the development of the radical press. Only if this selective perspective is maintained does the conventional view of advertising as a midwife of press independence appear plausible.

During the second half of the eighteenth century and in the early nineteenth century, a section of the commercial press became more politically independent largely as a consequence of the growth of advertising. This additional revenue reduced dependence on political subsidies; encouraged papers to reject covert secret service grants (the last English newspaper to receive a clandestine government grant was the *Observer* in 1840); improved the wages and security of employment of journalists so that they became less susceptible to government bribes; and, above all, financed greater expenditure on news-gathering so that newspapers became less reliant on official sources and more reluctant to trade their independence in return for obtaining 'prior intelligence' from the government. This shift was symbolized by *The Times's* magisterial declaration in 1834 that it would no longer accept early information from government offices since this was inconsistent with 'the pride and independence of our journal' and anyway its 'own information was earlier and surer' (*The Times*, 26 December 1834).

However, the growth of advertising did not transform the commercial press into an 'independent fourth estate'. On the contrary, the development of modern political parties from the 1860s onwards encouraged a closer interpenetration of party politics and commercial journalism. A number of leading proprietors in Victorian and Edwardian Britain were members of parliament, while some national newspapers were subsidized by party loyalists or from party funds until well into the twentieth century. This continuing involvement with government or opposition parties belied the often repeated claim that the press was an *independent* check on parliament and the executive: in reality, newspapers long remained an extension of the party system.<sup>1</sup>

The conventional portrayal of advertising as the midwife of press independence is also directly contradicted by the emergence of the radical press as a political force in the late eighteenth century. As we shall see, early radical papers did not obtain significant advertising support. Yet they were independent both of government and of political groupings in parliament. Their rise plainly demonstrated that newspapers could – and did – become autonomous from the state through financial support other than advertising.

The rise of the radical press as an extra-parliamentary force also revealed the limitations of official censorship. Successive governments sought to curb the radical press through the law courts. But although the seditious and blasphemous libel law was framed in a catch-all form that made any kind of fundamental criticism of the social order a legal offence, it was not always easy to enforce. Juries, empowered by Fox's Libel Act to determine guilt or innocence, were often reluctant to convict. This was brought home to the authorities by the sensational acquittals of Eaton, Hardy, and Tooke in the 1790s, Wooler and Hone in 1817, and Cobbett in 1831. The sharp edge of the law was further blunted in 1843, when Lord Campbell's Libel Act made the statement of truth in the public interest a legitimate defence in seditious libel suits.

Even before the 1843 Act was passed, the authorities had come round reluctantly to the view that libel prosecutions were often counter-productive. When the editor of *The Republican* was prosecuted in 1819, the paper's circulation rose by over 50 per cent. Similarly disillusioning experiences prompted the Attorney General to conclude in 1843 that 'a libeller thirsted for nothing more than the valuable advertisement of a public trial in a Court of Justice'. This disenchantment was reflected in a shift of government policy: there were only 16 prosecutions for seditious and blasphemous libel in the period 1825–34, compared with 167 prosecutions during the preceding eight years.

Instead the authorities came to rely increasingly on the newspaper stamp duty and taxes on paper and advertisements as a way of curbing the radical press. The intention of these press taxes was two-fold: to restrict the readership of newspapers to the well-to-do by raising cover prices; and to restrict the ownership of newspapers to the propertied class by increasing publishing costs. The belief was that substantial stakeholders in society would conduct newspapers 'in a more responsible manner than was likely to be the result of pauper management',<sup>2</sup> and that it was potentially dangerous to social order to allow the lower orders to read newspapers at all.

The stamp duty was increased by 266 per cent between 1789 and 1815. Publications subject to the stamp duty were redefined in 1819 to include political periodicals. In addition, a security system was introduced which required publishers of weeklies to register their papers and place financial bonds of between £200 and £300 with the authorities. Although the ostensible purpose of this requirement was to guarantee payment of libel fines, its real objective was to force up further the cost of publishing and thus ensure, as Lord Castlereagh

explained to the Commons, that ‘persons exercising the power of the press should be men of some respectability and property’.<sup>3</sup> Ironically in view of the way in which newspaper costs were to soar subsequently in an unfettered capitalist market, the government was persuaded by the parliamentary opposition that its original intention of insisting on a bond of £500 represented an unacceptable limitation on the freedom to publish.

The government’s reliance on taxes and securities as a way of containing the radical press worked for a time. The upsurge of radical journalism that occurred in the wake of the Napoleonic War weakened in the 1820s. But with the revival of radical agitation in the early 1830s, the authorities faced a more formidable challenge – the systematic evasion of the stamp duty by an underground press with a well-organized distribution network and ‘victims’ fund’ for the families of people imprisoned for selling unstamped newspapers.

The government responded initially by seeking to enforce the law more effectively. Printers of unstamped newspapers were rounded up; supplies of paper were intercepted; sellers of underground papers were jailed. At least 1,130 cases of selling unstamped newspapers were prosecuted in London alone during the period 1830–6. But despite these measures, the radical press continued to flourish. ‘Prosecutions, fines and imprisonments were alike failures’, the minister in charge of the fight against the unstamped press later recalled.<sup>4</sup> By the summer of 1836 the government was forced to concede defeat. The Commons was informed on 20 June that the government ‘had resorted to all means afforded by the existing law’ but that it ‘was altogether ineffectual to the purpose of putting an end to the unstamped papers’.

A crisis had been reached. By 1836 the unstamped press published in London had an aggregate readership of at least 2 million. According to government estimates, its circulation even exceeded that of the respectable, stamped press. The whole system of press control seemed on the point of final collapse, since leading publishers of stamped papers warned the government that they would also evade the stamp duty unless more effective steps were taken to enforce it.

The Whig government responded to the crisis with a well-planned counteroffensive. New measures were passed which strengthened the government’s search and confiscation powers. Penalties were also increased for being found in possession of an unstamped newspaper, and the stamp duty was reduced by 75 per cent in order to make ‘smuggling’ less attractive. Thus what has been seen as a landmark in the advance of press freedom was manifestly repressive in both intention and effect. As Spring Rice, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, explained to the Commons, a strategic concession, combined with increased coercive powers, was necessary in order to enforce a system that had broken down. The aim of these new measures, he stated candidly, was to ‘put down the unstamped papers’.<sup>5</sup>

The government’s new strategy succeeded in its immediate objective. ‘No unstamped papers can be attempted with success,’ declared Hetherington, a leading radical publisher,

shortly after being released from prison, unless ‘some means can be devised either to print the newspaper without types and presses, or render the premises . . . inaccessible to armed force’.<sup>6</sup> By 1837 the clandestine radical press had disappeared.

Compliance with the law forced radical newspapers to raise their prices, even though the stamp duty was much reduced. Whereas most unstamped papers had sold at 1d in the early 1830s, most of their successors in the 1840s sold at 4d or 5d – a sum that was well beyond the means of individual working-class consumers. But the government’s aim of destroying the radical press was nevertheless frustrated by organized consumer resistance. Informal groups of working people pooled their resources to purchase a radical paper each week. Union branches, clubs, and political associations financed the collective purchase of newspapers. Even taverns were threatened with the withdrawal of custom unless they bought radical papers. Partly as a consequence of this concerted resistance, new radical papers emerged which gained even larger circulations than those reached by their best-selling unstamped predecessors selling at a quarter the price.

Admittedly, after 1836, the radical press was not as strong in relation to the respectable press as it had been before. Between 1836 and 1855 there was a substantial growth in the number and circulation of commercial local weekly papers as well as in the readership of religious publications and of family and ‘useful knowledge’ magazines. But since much of this expansion appears to have taken place amongst the middle and lower-middle classes,<sup>7</sup> it did not greatly diminish the radical press’s influence within the working class.

The principal rivals to the radical press within the working class (of whom well over half were literate or semi-literate by the 1830s) were almanacs, printed ballads, gallowsheets, and chapbooks. But radical newspapers far outstripped their rivals as far as the political papers read by the working class were concerned.

Indeed, the radical press was the pacesetter in terms of newspaper circulation throughout much of the period 1815–55. Cobbett’s radical *Twopenny Trash* broke all circulation records in 1816–17. This record was probably beaten by the left-wing *Weekly Police Gazette* which, to judge from a government raid on its premises, had a circulation of over 40,000 in 1836 – well over double that of leading conservative weeklies such as the *Sunday Times* and *Bell’s Life in London*. In 1838 the militant *Northern Star* gained the largest circulation of any newspaper published in the provinces and, in 1839, the largest national circulation of any paper apart from the liberal radical *Weekly Dispatch*. Its success was followed by the still larger circulation secured by the radical *Reynolds News*, the paper with the second-largest circulation in Britain after the liberal radical *Lloyds Weekly* in the early 1850s. Both publications were the first newspapers to break through the 100,000 circulation barrier in 1856.<sup>8</sup>



Newspaper circulations during the first half of the nineteenth century seem very small by modern standards. But circulation statistics provide a misleading historical index of newspaper consumption, because the average number of readers per copy has declined markedly since the mid-nineteenth century. A copy of a leading radical paper such as the *Northern Star*, selling at 4 1/2d in 1840, cost approximately the equivalent of two pounds today. Sharing of high-cost papers, together with the widespread practice of reading papers aloud for the benefit of the semi-literate and illiterate, resulted in a very high number of 'readers' for each newspaper sold. Hollis and Epstein estimate, for instance, that radical papers in the 1830s and 1840s reached upwards of twenty readers per copy. This compares with an average of only two to three readers per copy of contemporary daily papers. Yet even if a cautious estimate of ten readers per copy is taken as the norm for radical papers in the early Victorian period, it still means that leading militant papers such as the *Northern Star* and its successor, *Reynolds News*, each reached at their peak, before the repeal of the stamp duty, half a million readers. This was at a time when the population of England and Wales over the age of 14 was little over 10 million. The emergent radical press was thus a genuinely popular force, reaching a mass public.

### **The economic structure of the radical press**

The rise of the radical press was a direct consequence of the emergence of a radical trade union and political movement. But its early ascendancy can only be understood in the context of the prevailing economic structure of the press industry. Since this is an important aspect of the central argument that follows, it is worth examining in some detail the finances of the early radical press.

The initial capital required to set up a radical paper in the early part of the nineteenth century was extremely small. Most radical unstamped papers were printed not on a steam press, but on hand presses, which cost as little as £10 to acquire. Metal type was often hired by the hour and print workers paid on a piecework basis.

After 1836 leading stamped radical papers were printed on more sophisticated machinery. The *London Dispatch*, for instance, was printed on a Napier machine, bought with the help of a wealthy well-wisher and the profits from Hetherington's other publications. The *Northern Star* had a printing press specially constructed for it in London. Even so, launch costs were extremely small in comparison with the subsequent period. The *Northern Star*, for instance, was launched in 1837 with a total capital of £690, mostly raised by public subscription.

Financing a paper during its initial establishment period could often cost more than setting it up. Even so, early trading losses were minimized by low operating costs. Radical unstamped papers paid no tax, relied heavily upon news reports filed by their readers on a

voluntary basis, and had small newsprint costs because of their high readership per copy. Consequently radical unstamped newspapers needed to attain only a small circulation in order to be economically viable. For instance, the *Poor Man's Guardian*, a leading newspaper of the early 1830s, broke even as soon as its circulation reached 2,500.

Even after 1836, when a penny stamp duty had to be paid on each copy, the running costs of the radical press remained relatively low. The influential *London Dispatch* reported, for example (17 September 1836), that 'the whole expense allowed for editing, reporting, reviewing, literary contributions etc., in fact, the entire cost of what is technically called "making up" the paper, is only six pounds per week'. In the same issue it reported that, at its selling price of 3 1/2d, it could break even with a circulation of 16,000. Similarly the *Northern Star* which unlike its predecessors developed a substantial network of paid correspondents, claimed to be spending little more than £9 10s a week on its reporting establishment in 1841. Selling at 4 1/2d, it was able to break even with a weekly circulation of about 6,200. This low break-even point meant that its run-in costs were very small. Indeed the *Northern Star* almost certainly moved into profit within its first month of publication.

Because publishing costs were low the ownership and control of newspapers could be in the hands of people committed, in the words of Joshua Hobson, an ex-handloom weaver and publisher of the *Voice of West Riding*, 'to support the rights and interests of the order and class to which it is my pride to belong'. Some newspapers, like the *Voice of the People*, the *Liberator*, and the *Trades Newspaper*, were owned by political or trade union organizations. Others were owned by individual proprietors like Cleave, Watson, and Hetherington, many of them people of humble origins who had risen to prominence through the working-class movement. While not lacking in ruthlessness or business acumen, the people they entrusted with the editing of their newspapers were all former manual workers like William Hill and Joshua Hobson, or middle-class activists like O'Brien and Lorymer, whose attitudes had been shaped by long involvement in working-class politics. A substantial section of the popular newspaper press reaching a working-class audience was thus controlled by those who were committed to the workingclass movement.

This pattern of ownership influenced the way in which journalists working for the radical press perceived their role. Unlike the institutionalized journalists of the later period, they tended to see themselves as activists rather than as professionals. Indeed many of the paid correspondents of the *Poor Man's Guardian*, *Northern Star*, and the early *Reynolds News* were also political organizers for the National Union of the Working Classes or the Chartist Movement. They sought to describe and expose the dynamics of power and inequality rather than to report 'hard news' as a series of disconnected events. They saw themselves as class representatives rather than as disinterested intermediaries and attempted to establish a relationship of real reciprocity with their readers. As the editor of the *Northern Star* wrote in its fifth anniversary issue,

I have ever sought to make it [the paper] rather a reflex of your minds than a medium through which to exhibit any supposed talent or intelligence of my own. This is precisely my conception of what a people's organ should be.

The second important feature of the economic structure of the radical press in the first half of the nineteenth century was that it was self-sufficient on the proceeds of sales alone. The radical unstamped press carried very little commercial advertising and the stamped radical press fared little better. The *London Dispatch* (17 September 1836) complained bitterly, for instance, of the 'prosecutions, fines and the like et ceteras with which a paper of our principles is sure to be more largely honoured than by the lucrative patronage of advertisers'. The grudge held by the *London Dispatch* and other radical newspapers against advertisers was fully justified. An examination of the official advertisement duty returns reveals a marked disparity in the amount of advertising duty per 1,000 copies (an index of comparison that takes into account differences in circulation) paid by the radical press compared with its more respectable rivals. For example, in 1840 two middle-class papers published in Leeds (the *Leeds Mercury* and *Leeds Intelligence*) and the four leading national daily papers (*The Times*, *Morning Post*, *Morning Chronicle*, and *Morning Advertiser*) all paid over fifty times more advertisement duty per 1,000 copies than the radical *Northern Star*, a Leeds-based paper with a national circulation.

A similar pattern emerges in the case of the other leading radical papers for which returns are available. In 1817, for instance, Cobbett's *Political Register* received only three advertisements: its advertisement duty per 1,000 copies was less than one-hundredth of that of respectable rival periodicals, although this disparity was somewhat reduced by the 1830s. The *London Dispatch* in 1837 was only marginally better off: it paid per 1,000 copies less than one twenty-fifth of the advertisement duty collected from each of its main respectable rivals in London, also with a national circulation.

This lack of support placed radical stamped newspapers at a serious disadvantage. All had less money to spend on editorial development than comparable respectable newspapers enjoying advertising patronage, and some were forced to close with larger circulations than better endowed rivals. This retarded the growth of the radical stamped press at a time when the high price of newspapers, inflated by the stamp duty, was a major deterrent against buying papers amongst the working class.

Yet despite these substantial disadvantages, the absence of advertising did not prevent the radical press from flourishing. While fortunes were not easily made, radical newspapers – both stamped and unstamped – could be highly profitable. Hetherington, the publisher of the stamped *London Dispatch*, was reported to be making £1,000 a year from his business in 1837. Similarly the stamped *Northern Star* was estimated to have produced a remarkable profit of £13,000 in 1839 and £6,500 in 1840, which was generated very largely from sales revenue.

This independence from advertising was itself a liberating force. Radical papers were, by the 1830s, increasingly oriented towards a working-class audience, and became more uncompromising in their attacks on capitalism. They were not forced to temper their radicalism or seek a more affluent readership by the need to attract more advertising. Instead they were free to respond to the radicalization of the working-class movement because they relied on their readers rather than advertisers for their economic viability.

### **The impact of the radical press**

The radical press did not merely reflect the growth of the working-class organizations: it also deepened and extended radical consciousness, helping to build support for the working-class movement.

One of the most important, and least remarked, aspects of the development of the radical press in the first half of the nineteenth century was that its leading publications developed a nationwide circulation. Even as early as the second decade, leading radical papers like the *Twopenny Trash*, *Political Register*, and *Republican* were read as far afield as Yorkshire, Lancashire, the Midlands, and East Anglia, as well as in the south of England. By the early 1830s the principal circulation newspapers like the *Weekly Police Gazette*, the *Poor Man's Guardian*, and *Dispatch* had a distribution network extending on a north–south axis from Glasgow to Truro, and on an east–west axis from Carmarthen to Norwich. Part of the impact of the radical press stemmed from this central fact – the extent of its geographical distribution.

The radical press was effective in reinforcing a growing consciousness of class and in unifying disparate elements of the working community, partly because its leading publications provided national coverage and reached a national working-class audience. It helped to extend the often highly exclusive occupational solidarity of ‘the new unionism’ to other sectors of the labour community by demonstrating the common predicament of unionists in different trades throughout the country. Workers attempting to set up an extra-legal union read in the radical press in 1833–4, for instance, of similar struggles by glove workers in Yeovil, cabinet-makers and joiners in Glasgow and Carlisle, shoemakers and smiths in Northampton, and bricklayers and masons in London, as well as of working-class struggles in Belgium and Germany. Similarly the radical press helped to reduce geographical isolation by showing that local agitation – whether against Poor Law Commissioners, new machinery, long working hours, or wage cutting – conformed to a common pattern throughout the country. The radical press further expanded its readers’ field of social vision by publishing, particularly in the later phase from the 1830s onwards, news that none of the respectable papers carried, and by interpreting this news within a

radical framework of analysis. It was, in the words of the Chartist leader, Feargus O'Connor, 'the link that binds the industrious classes together'.<sup>9</sup>

The radical press also helped to promote working-class organizations. Movements ranging from early trade unions to political organizations, like the National Union of the Working Classes and the Chartist Movement, partly depended for their success on the publicity they obtained from the radical press. O'Connor recalled that before the emergence of Chartist newspapers, 'I found that the press was entirely mute, while I was working myself to death, and that a meeting in one town did nothing for another.' Press publicity stimulated people to attend meetings and to become involved in political and industrial organizations; it also brought the activist vanguard of the working-class movement into national prominence helping, for example, to turn farm workers victimized for joining a trade union in the remote village of Tolpuddle into national working-class heroes. No less important, it helped to sustain the morale of activists in the working-class movement confronted by what must have seemed, at times, insuperable odds. Without the *Northern Star*, declared one speaker at a local Chartist meeting, 'their own sounds might echo through the wilderness'.<sup>10</sup>

Above all, the radical press contributed to a major political shift within a section of the working class. We have become so accustomed to the individualized pattern of newspaper consumption amidst a steady flow of information from a variety of media that it is difficult to understand the political significance of newspapers in the early nineteenth century. Newspapers were often the only readily available source of information about what was happening outside the local community and, in some cases, generated passionate loyalty amongst their readers. Fielden recalls, for instance, 'on the day the newspaper, the *Northern Star*; O'Connor's paper, was due, the people used to line the roadside waiting for its arrival, which was paramount to everything else for the time being'. The impact of the radical press was further reinforced by the discussions that followed the reading aloud of articles from newspapers in taverns, workshops, homes, and public meetings, vividly described in numerous memoirs and reminiscences.<sup>11</sup> This social pattern of consumption (which continued on a diminished scale late into the nineteenth century) resulted in political newspapers having a much greater agitational effect than those of today.

The first wave of radical papers from the 1790s through to the late 1820s played an important part in the psychological reorientation that preceded the political mobilization of a section of the working class. They raised expectations both by invoking a mythical past in which plenty and natural justice had prevailed, and by proclaiming the possibility of a future in which poverty could be relieved through political means. It was this raising of hopes, combined with a direct assault on the Anglican 'morality' which sanctioned the social order, that most alarmed parliamentarians at the time. As Dr Philimore, MP, warned

the Commons following official reports that servants and common soldiers had been seen reading radical newspapers,

Those infamous publications . . . inflame [working people's] passions and awaken their selfishness, contrasting their present conditions with what they contend to be their future condition – a condition incompatible with human nature, and with those immutable laws which Providence has established for the regulation of civil society.<sup>12</sup>

The radical press not only helped to erode political passivity, based on fatalistic acceptance of the social system as 'natural' and 'providential', but also began to dispel the collective lack of confidence that had inhibited workingclass resistance. The least valued section of the community was able to obtain a new understanding of its role in society through its own press. 'The real strength and all the resources of the country,' characteristically proclaimed Cobbett's *Political Register*, for instance, 'ever have sprung from the *labour* of its people.' This novel view of the world, popularized through the more radical journals, provided a means of reordering the entire ranking of status and moral worth in society. The highest in the land were degraded to the lowest place in society as unproductive parasites: working people, in contrast, were elevated to the top as the productive and useful section of the community. The early militant press thus fostered an alternative value system that symbolically turned the world upside down. It also repeatedly emphasized the potential power of working people to effect social change through the force of 'combination' and organized action.

The radical press also played a part in radicalizing the emergent workingclass movement by developing a more sophisticated political analysis. The first generation of radical papers that developed during the Napoleonic War was trapped inside the intellectual categories of the eighteenth-century liberal attack on the aristocratic constitution. Conflict was generally portrayed in political terms as a struggle between the aristocracy and the 'productive classes' (usually defined to include working capitalists as well as the working classes), while criticism was mainly focused upon corruption in high places and repressive taxation that was said to impoverish the productive community. By implication, this critique would have left the economic reward structure of society fundamentally unchanged.

By the 1830s the more militant papers had shifted their focus of attack from 'old corruption' to the economic process which enabled the capitalist class to appropriate in profits the wealth created by labour. Conflict was redefined as a class struggle between labour and capital, between the working classes and a coalition of aristocrats, 'millocrats', and 'shopocrats'. This more militant analysis signposted the way forward towards a far-

reaching programme of reconstruction in which, in the words of the *Poor Man's Guardian* (19 October 1833), workers will 'be at the top instead of at the bottom of society – or rather that there should be no bottom or top at all'.

This new analysis was often conflated with the old liberal analysis in an uncertain synthesis. There was, moreover, a basic continuity in the perspectives offered by the less militant wing of the radical press, which grew in influence during the 1840s. But such continuity should come as no surprise. It was only natural that the political complexion of the broad left press should reflect the ebb and flow of militancy within the radical movement. Nor is it at all surprising that traditional political beliefs should have persisted over a time-span as brief as twenty-five years. But so long as the activist working class controlled its own popular press, it collectively possessed the means to arrive at a more radical understanding of society. It also had an institutional resource for defining, expressing, and maintaining a radical public opinion different from that proclaimed by the capitalist press, as well as a defence against the ideological assault mounted on the working class through schools, mechanics' institutes, and useful knowledge magazines.

The militant press sustained a radical sub-culture, which represented a potential threat to the social order. Indeed in 1842, a General Strike was called to secure universal suffrage through the force of industrial action. It received extensive support in industrial Lancashire, much of Yorkshire, and parts of the Midlands. While the strike was crushed, and some 1,500 labour leaders were imprisoned, it was a sign of an increasingly unsettled society in which the radical press had become a destabilizing element.

In short, the control system administered through the state had failed. Neither prosecutions for seditious libel nor a tax system designed to ration newspapers had succeeded in preventing the rise of the radical press. As we shall see, this prompted thoughtful parliamentarians to consider whether there might be a better way of containing insurgent journalism.

## Notes

- 1 Colin Seymour-Ure, and Lucy Brown – have documented the press's continuing involvement in party politics long after the press is supposed to have blossomed as an 'independent fourth estate'. Their studies have thus modified one aspect of the traditional Whig interpretation of press history. For more about this, see chapter 5.
- 2 Pelham, *Parliamentary Debates*, 11 (1832), cols 491–2.
- 3 Castlereagh, *Parliamentary Debates*, 91 (1819), cols 1,177 ff.
- 4 Spring Rice, *Parliamentary Debates*, 138 (1855), col. 966.
- 5 Spring Rice, *Parliamentary Debates*, 34 (1836), cols 627–34; 37 (1837), col. 1,165.

- 6 *London Dispatch* (17 September 1836).
- 7 Report of the Select Committee on Newspaper Stamps (SCNS), *Parliamentary Papers*, 17 (1851); Milner-Gibson, *Parliamentary Debates*, 135 (1853), col. 1,136, amongst others.
- 8 P. Hollis, *The Pauper Press* (London, Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 95; *Parliamentary Debates*, 34 (1836), col. 627; SCNS Appendix 4; V. Berridge, 'Popular Sunday papers and mid-Victorian society' in G. Boyce, J. Curran, and P. Wingate (eds), *Newspaper History* (London, Constable, 1978), p. 249.
- 9 *Northern Star* (16 January 1841).
- 10 *Northern Star* (26 August 1848).
- 11 For instance, W. E. Adams, *Memoirs of a Social Atom*, vol. 1 (London, Hutchinson, 1903), pp. 164–6; interview with Wesley Perrins, *Bulletin of the Society for the Study of Labour History* (1970), pp. 16–24.
- 12 Dr Philimore, *Parliamentary Debates*, 91 (1819), col. 1,363.



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*The ugly face of reform*

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The parliamentary campaign against ‘the taxes on knowledge’ is generally portrayed as a triumphant campaign for a free press, sustained by an amalgam of special interests but motivated largely by libertarian ideals in opposition to the authoritarian legacy of the past.<sup>1</sup> The only discordant note in this inspiring account comes from the parliamentary campaigners celebrated in this historical legend. Their aims and, indeed, their public utterances are difficult to reconcile with the historic role assigned to them in liberal ideology.

Widespread evasion of the stamp duty in the early 1830s caused press regulation to become a major political issue. Traditionalists argued that the government should enforce the stamp duty with tougher measures, while a relatively small group of reformers in parliament argued that the stamp duty had become unenforceable in the face of mass resistance and should be repealed. The two sides to the debate did not disagree over objectives so much as over tactics. As the Lord Chancellor succinctly put it in 1834,

the only question to answer, and the only problem to solve, is how they [the people] shall read in the best manner; how they shall be instructed politically, and have political habits formed the most safe for the constitution of the country.

Traditionalists alleged that abolition of the stamp duty would result in the country being flooded with ‘atrocious publications’. Reformers countered by arguing that the stamp duty merely suppressed ‘the cheap reply’ to seditious publications from responsible quarters. Radical publishers were not being stopped by inefficient controls. Instead they were being given a clear field in which to indoctrinate the people with ‘the most pernicious doctrines’ without encountering any competition.<sup>2</sup>

Underlying this difference over tactics were divergent approaches to social control. Supporters of press regulation tended to favour coercion. Reformers, on the other hand,

generally stressed the importance of engineering social consent. As Bulwer Lytton argued when proposing the repeal of the stamp duty in 1832:

At this moment when throughout so many nations we see the people at war with their institutions, the world presents to us two great, may they be impressive examples. In Denmark, a despotism without discontent – in America, a republic without change. The cause is the same in both: in both the people are universally educated.

The parliamentary repeal lobby argued that the lifting of the stamp duty would encourage men of capital to invest in an expanding market and consequently enrol ‘more temperate and disinterested friends of the people who would lend themselves to their real instruction’. In particular, many of the parliamentary campaigners of the 1830s believed that cheap newspapers, owned by capitalists, would become an educational weapon in the fight against trade unionism. Francis Place, the organizing secretary of the repeal campaign, even told a parliamentary Select Committee in 1832 that ‘there would not have been a single trades union either in England or Scotland’ if the stamp duty had been repealed some years earlier. Similarly Roebuck informed the Commons that if the stamp duty had been lifted agricultural workers at Tolpuddle would probably not have been so ignorant as to have joined a trade union. Another leading campaigner, Grote, was even more sanguine about the benefits of an expanded, capitalist press: ‘a great deal of the bad feeling that was at present abroad amongst the labouring classes on the subject of wages’ was due, he believed, to ‘the want of proper instruction and correct information as to their real interests’ caused by taxes on the press.<sup>3</sup>

What these parliamentary campaigners for a ‘free press’ emphasized was not libertarian principle but the need for a more positive approach to political indoctrination. Their speeches occasionally betrayed anxiety, however, that the time might not be right to lift controls on the press. It was this ambivalence which perhaps explains why so few amongst the repeal lobby of MPs voted consistently against the government’s counter-offensive in 1836 designed, as we have seen, to restore the stamp duty and destroy the radical press. In the revealing words of Collet, who was later to co-ordinate the campaign for a free press in Westminster, the government’s attack on radical journalism was ‘not a liberal, but it was in some respects, a statesman-like measure’.<sup>4</sup>

### **The new campaign**

A new parliamentary lobby against ‘the taxes on knowledge’ was organized in 1848. Although it posed as a broadly based organization, it had a narrow social base. As Cobden confided privately, ‘exclusively almost, we comprise steady, sober middle-class reformers.’

The driving force behind the campaign was a group of liberal industrialist MPs who saw in the repeal of press taxation a means of propagating the principles of free trade and competitive capitalism. In particular, they hoped that a reduction of newspaper prices, following the abolition of press taxes, would assist the growth of the local commercial press with which many of them were closely connected and undermine the dominant position of the 'unreliable' *Times* by exposing it to increased competition.

They involved politicians of all persuasions, as well as a variety of groups such as temperance campaigners, educationalists, and publishers (though these last were deeply divided over the stamp duty). There were differences within this reform coalition, but for the most part these reflected tensions and rivalries between middle-class and patrician reformers, with different motives for wanting to reach a wider public. However, common to them all was a desire to proselytize the masses, and a belief that the social order would rest on a firmer foundation if it was based on social consent fostered by an expanded, capitalist press. 'The larger we open the field of general instruction,' declared Palmerston when speaking for the repeal of the stamp duty in the Commons, 'the firmer the foundations on which the order, the loyalty and good conduct of the lower classes will rest.' Repeal the taxes on knowledge, proclaimed the Irish politician, Maguire, and 'You render the people better citizens, more obedient to the laws, more faithful and loyal subjects, and more determined to stand up for the honour of the country.' 'The freedom of the press', argued Gladstone, 'was not merely to be permitted and tolerated, but to be highly prized, for it tended to bring closer together all the national interests and preserve the institutions of the country.' The new market-based press, they were agreed, would be an effective instrument of social control.<sup>5</sup>

But while the fundamental objectives of the campaign against press taxes were the same as before, its rhetoric was modified. Whig history was invoked more often to stigmatize supporters of press taxes as enemies of liberty and the heirs of court censorship of the press. Opposition to press taxation was more frequently voiced in the form of abstract and elevated principle. Freedom of expression should not be taxed; truth would confound error in open debate; good publications would drive out bad ones in fair competition; and even that truth would emerge only through the interplay of the free market-place of ideas.

Reformers' apposition of libertarian and authoritarian arguments may seem a little incongruous to contemporary ears. But most respectable campaigners against the 'taxes on knowledge' appear not to have perceived any tension to exist between the concepts of press freedom and social control. Thus Alexander Andrews, editor of the first journalists' trade journal, argued that the great mission of a free press was to 'educate and enlighten those classes whose political knowledge has been hitherto so little, and by consequence so dangerous.' This theme of political indoctrination fused naturally and unselfconsciously with that of liberty. 'The list of our public journals', Andrews continued, 'is a proud and

noble list – the roll call of an army of liberty, with a rallying point in every town. It is a police of safety, and a sentinel of public morals.’<sup>6</sup> The very facility with which these dissonant themes could be conflated reveals the ideological universe within which the press freedom campaign was constructed. A tacit model of society which admitted no conflict of class interest, only a conflict between ignorance and enlightenment and between the individual and the state, provided the intellectual framework in which a free press could be perceived as both a watch-dog of government and guard-dog of the people.

Moreover, commitment to the principle of free competition was not entirely disinterested. The arguments for a free market press were part of a wider discourse that had been deployed in middle-class-dominated campaigns against the aristocratic state across a broad front. Open competition in the free market-place of talent was a key theme in the campaigns to reform the armed forces, the civil service, and the universities during the 1850s, which extended well-remunerated employment to the professional middle class. The material blessings of competition in the free market had also been extensively invoked in the attacks on the Corn Law and protectionism during the 1840s and 1850s. In the context of the press, enthusiasm for reform reflected a growing confidence amongst middle-class reformers that their views would prevail at a time when their intellectual ascendancy seemed increasingly assured.

The key members of the press freedom campaign were also under no illusion that a free market would be neutral. More sophisticated than their predecessors in the 1830s, they had a better understanding of how the press industry worked. The repeal of press taxes, declared Milner-Gibson, president of the Association for the Promotion of the Repeal of the Taxes on Knowledge (APRTK), would create ‘a cheap press in the hands of men of good moral character, of respectability, and of capital’. Aware of the rise of capital and operating costs in popular newspaper publishing in the USA, he believed that free market processes would favour entrepreneurs with large financial resources. Free trade, he stressed, in common with other leading campaigners, would ‘give to men of capital and respectability the power of gaining access by newspapers, by faithful record of the facts, to the minds of the working classes’. The free market, argued Sir George Lewis, the Liberal Chancellor of the Exchequer, would promote papers ‘enjoying the preference of the advertising public’. Furthermore, reformers argued, responsible control over a cheap press would educate public demand. As one campaigner put it, ‘the appetite grows by what it feeds on.’<sup>7</sup>

Some reformers also believed that the rising pay and status of journalists would encourage moderation and good sense. The establishment of a cheap press, explained Hickson, a leading campaigner, would create a new hierarchical system of communication in which journalists ‘two or three degrees’ above the labouring classes would enlighten them. To Gladstone, the principal attraction of repeal was that it would lead to more men of ‘quality’ working in the press, and consequently educating the people. ‘A perfectly free

press', wryly commented the journalist, J. F. Stephen, 'is one of the greatest safeguards of peace and order' since successful journalists belong to 'the comfortable part of society' and will 'err rather on the side of making too much of their interests than on that of neglecting them'.<sup>8</sup>

Reinforcing this commitment to creating a cheap, unrestricted press was a growing conviction that it was now safe to lift controls. The radical workingclass movement was on the retreat in the 1850s. There was, proclaimed reformers, 'a great increase of intelligence among the people'.<sup>9</sup> Even those who were uncertain whether the working class would 'become the glory, or might prove greatly dangerous to the peace, of the country', agreed that it was a good time to attempt an experiment. Significantly, only those who were convinced that the lower classes were wedded to radical prejudices (and this group included not only entrenched traditionalists but also some distinguished liberals committed to free market competition in other spheres)<sup>10</sup> remained resolutely opposed to the repeal of the stamp duty.

The campaign against press taxes was conducted with remarkable skill and tenacity. Reformers packed the Parliamentary Select Committee on the Stamp Duty and largely determined the contents of its report. They attacked poorly briefed ministers and won the support of officials in the Board of Inland Revenue. They harassed the government through the law courts, exposed the inconsistencies in the way the stamp duty was enforced, organized public meetings, petitions, and deputations, and attacked press taxes in sympathetic newspapers. Their political virtuosity was finally rewarded with the abolition of the advertisement duty in 1853, the stamp duty in 1855, the paper duty in 1861, and the security system in 1869.

However, the parliamentary campaign for a free press was never inspired by a modern libertarian commitment to diversity of expression. Indeed the ruthless repression of the unstamped press in the mid-1830s had much the same objective as the campaign which set the press 'free' twenty years later: the subordination of the press to the social order. All that had changed was a growing commitment to positive indoctrination of the lower orders through a cheap press, and a growing conviction that free trade and normative controls were a morally preferable and more efficient control system than direct controls administered by the state. Underlying this shift was the growing power and confidence of the Victorian middle class, which dominated the parliamentary campaign for repeal of press taxes and recognized in the expanding press a powerful agency for the advancement of their interests.

The confidence of reformers in the 'free' market-place of opinion proved to be justified. The radical press was eclipsed in the period after the repeal of press taxes. Why this happened has never been adequately explained.

## Notes

- 1 For instance, G. A. Cranfield, *The Press and Society* (Harlow, Longman, 1978), p. 205. This view is contested in relation to the 1830s by P. Hollis, *The Pauper Press* (London, Oxford University Press, 1970), and by J. Wiener, *The War of the Unstamped* (New York, Cornell University Press, 1969).
- 2 *Parliamentary Debates*, 13 (1832), cols 619–48; 23 (1834), cols 1,193–1,222; 30 (1835), cols 835–62; 34 (1836), cols 627 ff.; 35 (1836), cols 566 ff., 46 (1837), cols 1,164–84. In actual fact the radical unstamped press did not have a ‘clear field’. The authorities harassed radical unstamped papers, while regularly turning a blind eye to ‘moderate’ unstamped papers in the early 1830s.
- 3 Place, Select Committee on Drunkenness, *Parliamentary Papers*, 8 (1834), question 2,054; Roebuck, *Parliamentary Debates*, 23 (1834) cols 1,208–9; Grote, *ibid.*, col. 1,221.
- 4 C. D. Collet, *History of the Taxes on Knowledge: Their Origin and Repeal*, vol. 1 (London, T. Fisher Unwin, 1899).
- 5 Palmerston, *Parliamentary Debates*, 127 (1854), col. 459; Maguire, *Parliamentary Debates*, 157 (1860), col. 383; Gladstone, cit. J. Grant, *The Newspaper Press: Its Origins, Progress and Present Position* (London, Tinsley Brothers, 1871–2).
- 6 A. Andrews, *The History of British Journalism to 1855* (London, Richard Bentley, 1859), ii, p. 347.
- 7 Milner-Gibson, *Parliamentary Debates*, 137 (1855), col. 434, and *Parliamentary Debates*, 110 (1850), col. 378; Lewis, *Parliamentary Debates*, 137 (1855), col. 786; Whitty, Report of the Select Committee on Newspaper Stamps (SCNS), *Parliamentary Papers*, 17 (1851), para. 600.
- 8 Hickson, SCNS (1851), para. 3, 169; Gladstone, *Parliamentary Debates*, 137 (1855), col. 794; J. F. Stephen, ‘Journalism’, *Cornhill Magazine*, 6 (1862).
- 9 Bulwer Lytton, *Parliamentary Debates*, 137 (1855), col. 1,118; Ingram, *Parliamentary Debates*, 151 (1858), col. 112; Digby Seymour, *Parliamentary Debates*, 125 (1853), col. 1,166.
- 10 For instance, J. R. McCulloch, *Dictionary of Commerce and Commercial Navigation* (London, Longman, Brown, & Green, 1854), p. 893.

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## *The industrialization of the press*

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During the half century following the repeal of the ‘taxes on knowledge’, a number of radical newspapers closed down or were eventually incorporated, like the *Reynolds News*, into the mainstream of popular Liberal journalism. Militant journalism survived only in the etiolated form of small circulation national periodicals and struggling local weeklies. Yet this decline occurred during a period of rapid press expansion, when local daily papers were established in all the major urban centres of Britain and a new generation of predominantly right-wing national newspapers came into being. These included newspapers such as the *People* (1881), *Daily Mail* (1896), *Daily Express* (1900), and *Daily Mirror* (1903), which have played a prominent role in British journalism ever since.

Most historians, on the left as well as the right, attribute the decline of radical journalism to a change in the climate of public opinion. The collapse of Chartism in the early 1850s produced a wave of disillusion. Many radical activists were absorbed into the Liberal Party, particularly after the upper strata of the working class gained the vote in 1867. Trade unions also became more inward looking, seeking to improve wages and working conditions rather than to change the structure of society. These changes were reinforced by the winning of significant social reforms and, above all, by the relative success of the British economy: most workers in employment became substantially better off during the second half of the nineteenth century. Intensive proselytization of the working class through schools, churches, youth clubs, and other socializing agencies like the Volunteer Force also contributed to the spread of anti-socialist views.

These developments diminished the potential market for radical journalism. They also had another consequence which has tended to be overlooked. The reduction of support for the left made it more difficult to raise money within the working-class movement for new publishing ventures. As the TUC Congress debates in the early part of the twentieth century make clear, many Liberal and Lib-Lab trade unionists were reluctant to invest their members’ money in setting up new socialist publications because they had become reconciled to the commercial press.

However, this 'Zeitgeist' interpretation provides an insufficient explanation for the fall of the radical press. It is based on the over-simplistic assumption that journalists are necessarily influenced by the prevailing ideas of the time, and are forced to respond in a competitive market to the demands of the sovereign consumer. Consequently the press ventriloquizes, it is claimed, the views of the mass public.

In fact the evidence clearly shows that there was no close correspondence between the climate of opinion in the country and the political character of the press. What may be broadly defined as the radical press was still a powerful force in popular journalism in 1860 when the working-class movement was divided and defeated. In sharp contrast, the radical press was dwarfed by its rivals fifty years later, when the radical movement was gathering momentum.<sup>1</sup> The steady growth of general trade unionism, the radicalization of skilled workers, the spread of socialist and Labourist ideas, the rise of the suffragette movement, and the revival of industrial militancy did not give rise to an efflorescence of radical journalism in the decade before the First World War, although it produced a few notable publications. The absence of a close correlation between press and public opinion is further underlined by voting figures. In the 1918 general election, for instance, the Labour Party gained 22 per cent of the vote but did not obtain the unreserved support of a single national daily or Sunday newspaper.

Lucy Brown has recently suggested a supplementary explanation for the decline of 'critical vigour' in the Victorian press. She shows that the political élite devoted more time and skill to cultivating the press, and became increasingly dominant as sources and definers of news. But while this helps to explain the rightward drift of part of the commercial press, it still does not account for the eclipse of radical journalism. The militant press's adversarial style effectively inoculated it against the gentler arts of press management described by Brown. Its weakness was more fundamental: its share of circulation steadily declined during the later Victorian period.

Virginia Berridge has advanced a more compelling, if incomplete, explanation of the decline of committed journalism. This was due, she argues, to the 'commercialization' of the popular press. New popular papers came into being which were primarily business ventures, relying on sensationalist manipulation of popular sentiment rather than what she calls the 'genuine arousal' of militant journalism. In other words, they concentrated on entertainment rather than taxing political analysis, and consequently secured a much larger audience than politically committed papers.

Berridge's pioneering analysis focuses attention upon a significant change within part of the radical press. Its circulation during the 1840s was swollen by the emergence of the *News of the World* and *Lloyds Weekly*, both commercial papers whose radicalism was the product more of commercial expediency than of political commitment. As the *News of the World* frankly stated in its first issue (1 October 1843), 'It is only by a very extensive circulation that



the proprietors can be compensated for the outlay of a large capital in this novel and original undertaking.’ Although the same issue contained an impassioned attack upon conditions in some poor-houses, where inmates were forced to wear prison clothes, the paper also made clear that its general orientation was to please as many people as possible by serving ‘the general utility of all classes’. This led to the adoption of consensual views and the growth of entertainment at the expense of political news. Yet, not very surprisingly, Sunday papers in the *News of the World* mould, with a professionally processed combination of news, sport, human interest stories, and political commentary, proved more appealing than the didactic journals that were the principal organs of the left in late Victorian Britain.

This explanation is persuasive as far as it goes. But it glosses over one striking feature of the development of the radical press. During the first half of the nineteenth century left-wing papers evolved from being journals of opinion, based on a quarto format, into broadsheet newspapers carrying news as well as commentary. This change was particularly marked during the 1830s, and was accompanied by a significant broadening of news content. Some of these radical papers began to develop a wide audience appeal by drawing upon the popular street literature tradition of chapbooks, broadsheets, gallowsheets, and almanacs. Indeed Cleave’s *Weekly Police Gazette*, the *London Dispatch*, and the early militant *Reynolds News* were important partly because they started to rework this popular tradition in ways that projected a radical ideology through human interest news and entertainment as well as through political coverage.

Why, then, did the committed radical press increasingly retreat in the second half of the nineteenth century into the ghetto of narrowly politicized journalism? Why did it leave the field of popular news coverage and entertainment to the commercial press? Thus the question that needs to be asked is not why Victorian working people should have preferred the *News of the World* to rather arid socialist journals such as *Justice* and *Commonweal*, but why the radical press should have failed to live up to its early promise (or, in Berridge’s terms, to its early indications of superficiality).

Her analysis is an historical version of a standard critique of mass culture. This assumes that material commercially processed as a commodity for the mass market is inevitably ‘debased’ because it relies on the manipulation of public tastes and attitudes for profit. This is based on assumptions that are open to question. In the context of Victorian Britain, it also obscures under the general heading of ‘commercialization’ the complex system of controls institutionalized by the industrialization of the Victorian press.

### **The freedom of capital**

One of the central objectives of state economic controls on the press – to exclude pauper management – was attained only by its repeal. This was partly because a craft system of

production was replaced by an industrial one. The lifting of press taxes set up a chain reaction: lower prices, increased sales, and the development of new print technology to service an expanding market. Rotary presses, fed by hand, were introduced in the 1860s and 1870s and were gradually replaced by web rotary machines of increasing size and sophistication in late Victorian and Edwardian England. ‘Craft’ composing was mechanized by Hattersley’s machine in the 1860s, and this was replaced by the linotype machine in the 1880s and 1890s. Numerous innovations were also made in graphic reproduction. These developments led to a sharp rise in fixed capital costs. Northcliffe estimated half a million pounds as ‘the initial cost of machinery, buildings, ink factories and the like, and this was altogether apart from the capital required for daily working expenses’ in setting up the *Daily Mail* in 1896 – although this figure almost certainly included the cost of establishing the paper as a property around which other publications were grouped.<sup>2</sup>

This enormous increase in capital investment made it much more difficult for people with limited funds to break into mass publishing. It also gave considerable economic advantages to newspaper groups which printed more than one paper at the same plant. The profits from the vertical integration of publishing – Edward Lloyd led the way in the 1870s and 1880s by establishing paper mills and growing esparto grass as raw material for paper – were also reinvested in the development of newspaper enterprises. Nevertheless, the rising fixed capital costs of newspaper publishing did not constitute an insuperable obstacle to the launch of new publications with limited capital resources even in the national market. Newspapers like the *Daily Herald*, launched in 1912, could be started with only limited capital by being printed on a contract basis by an independent printer.

A more important financial consequence of the repeal of press taxes was to force up the running costs of newspaper publishing. National newspapers became substantial enterprises with large staffs and long print runs. They also cut their cover prices. The combination of rising expenditure and lower cover prices forced up the circulation level that newspapers had to achieve in order to be profitable. This raised, in turn, the run-in costs of new papers before they built their circulations to break-even point. New newspapers could be launched with limited funds and derelict newspapers could be bought relatively cheaply. It was increasingly the establishment of newspapers that required large capital resources.

Thus in 1855 Disraeli was advised by D. C. Coulton that a capital of about £20,000 was needed to start a London daily paper. In 1867 W. H. Smith estimated that about £50,000 was needed to fund a new London morning paper. By the 1870s Edward Lloyd needed to spend £150,000 to establish the *Daily Chronicle* (after buying it for £30,000). During the period 1906–8 Thomasson spent about £300,000 attempting to establish the liberal daily, *Tribune*. By the 1920s, however, Lord Cowdray spent about £750,000 attempting to convert the *Westminster Gazette* into a quality daily. Even more was spent on developing mass-circulation papers during the same period.

Indeed the full extent of the material transformation of the press is perhaps most clearly revealed by comparing the launch and establishment costs of newspapers before and after the industrialization of the press. As we have seen, the total cost of establishing the *Northern Star*, a national weekly newspaper, on a profitable basis in 1837 was little more than £690. It was able to break even with a circulation of about 6,200 copies, which was probably achieved within the first month. In contrast the *Sunday Express*, launched in 1918, had over £2 million spent on it before it broke even, with a circulation of well over 250,000. Thus while a public subscription in northern towns was sufficient to launch a national weekly in the 1830s, it required the resources of an international conglomerate controlled by Beaverbrook to do the same thing nearly a century later.<sup>3</sup>

These statistics illustrate the privileged position of capital in the creation of the modern press. Even when the costs of launching and establishing a popular paper were relatively low in the 1850s and 1860s, they still exceeded the resources readily available to the working class. The *Beehive*, for instance, was started in 1862 with capital of less than £250 raised by trade union organizations and a well-to-do sympathizer. Its inadequate funding crippled it. Although it set out to be a paper with a broad audience appeal, it lacked the finances to be anything other than a weekly journal of opinion. Despite a small amount of additional capital put up by unions and other contributors, it was also forced to sell at double the price of the large-circulation weeklies it had been intended to compete against. In effect, its under-capitalization condemned it to the margins of national publishing as a specialist, if influential, weekly paper.

As the resources of organized labour increased, so did the costs of establishing a national paper. It was not until 1912 that papers financed and controlled from within the working class made their first appearance in national daily journalism – long after most national daily papers had become well established. The brief career of the *Daily Citizen*, and the early history of the *Daily Herald*, illustrate the economic obstacles to setting up papers under working-class control. The *Daily Citizen*, launched in 1912 with a capital of only £30,000 (subscribed mainly by trade unions), reached a circulation of 250,000 at its peak within two years and was only 50,000 short of overhauling the *Daily Express*. But although the *Daily Citizen* almost certainly acquired more working-class readers than any other daily, it still closed three years after its launch.

The more left-wing *Daily Herald*, started with only £300 and sustained by public donations, lurched from one crisis to another despite reaching a circulation of over 250,000 at its meridian before 1914. On one occasion it came out in pages of different sizes and shapes because someone ‘found’ old discarded paper supplies when the *Daily Herald* could no longer afford to pay for new paper. On another occasion it bought small quantities of paper under fictitious names from suppliers all over the country. Later it

secured paper supplies without a guarantee by threatening to organize, through its trade union connections, industrial action against paper manufacturers. While the *Daily Citizen* closed, the *Daily Herald* survived by switching from being a daily to becoming a weekly during the period 1914–19. Lack of sufficient capital prevented its continuation in any other form.

The rise in publishing costs helps to explain why the committed left press in the late nineteenth century existed only as undercapitalized, low-budget, high-price specialist periodicals and as local community papers, an important but as yet relatively undocumented aspect of the residual survival of the radical press. The operation of the free market had raised the cost of press ownership beyond the readily available resources of the working class.

Market forces thus accomplished more than the most repressive measures of an aristocratic state. The security system introduced in 1819 to ensure that the press was controlled by ‘men of some respectability and capital’ had fixed the financial qualifications of press ownership at a mere £200–300. This financial hurdle was raised a hundredfold in the period celebrated for the rise of a free press.<sup>4</sup>

But although the heavy capitalization of the British press was an important factor inhibiting the launch of new radical papers, it still does not explain the ideological absorption of radical papers already in existence before the repeal of the press taxes. Nor does it fully explain why small-circulation radical papers could not develop into profitable mass-circulation papers and accumulate enough capital, through retained profits, to finance new publications. For an answer to these questions we need to look elsewhere.

### **The new licensing system: advertising**

The crucial element of the new control system was the strategic role acquired by advertisers after the repeal of the advertisement duty in 1853. Before then, the advertisement tax had made certain forms of advertising uneconomic. As John Cassell, the publisher of popular useful knowledge publications, argued before the Parliamentary Select Committee on Newspaper Stamps, ‘It [the advertisement duty] entirely prevents a certain class of advertisements from appearing: it is only such as costly books and property sales by auction that really afford an opportunity of advertising and for paying the duty.’

Cassell exaggerated the impact of the advertisement duty for political reasons. The growth of trade, and the halving of the advertisement duty in 1833, had led to a substantial increase in press advertising in the 1830s and 1840s. Even before that, most commercial newspapers – but not the radical press – had been reliant on advertising. But it was only

with the abolition of the advertisement duty in 1853 that popular press advertising came fully into its own. Between 1854 and 1858, for instance, *Reynolds News* increased its advertising volume by over 50 per cent. This surge in advertising expenditure, combined with the repeal of the stamp and paper duties, transformed the economic structure of the popular press. The modal price of popular papers was halved in the 1850s and halved again in the 1860s. At the new prevailing price structure, nearly all newspapers – including those with very large circulations like *Reynolds News* – depended on advertising for their profits since their net cover prices no longer met their costs. Advertisers thus acquired a *de facto* licensing power since, without their support, newspapers ceased to be economically viable.

Rising circulations, falling print unit costs and, between 1875 and 1895, the sharp fall in the price of newsprint did not diminish the central role of advertising in the press. Advertising expenditure steadily increased in the Victorian and Edwardian period, rising to an estimated £20 million in 1907. This financed bigger papers, more staff, and the introduction of sale-or-return arrangements with distributors. It also helped to underwrite a further halving of the price of most popular papers to 1/2d in the late Victorian period.

The political implications of newspapers' economic dependence on advertising have been ignored largely because it is assumed that advertisers bought space in newspapers on the basis of market rather than political criteria. But political considerations played a significant part in some advertisers' calculations during the Victorian period. In 1856 the principal advertising handbook detailed the political views of most London and local newspapers with the proud boast that 'till this Directory was published, the advertiser had no means of accurately determining which journal *might be best adapted to his views*, and most likely to forward his interests'<sup>5</sup> (emphasis added). Even non-socialist newspapers found that controversial editorial policies led to the loss of commercial advertising. The *Pall Mall Gazette's* advertising revenue dropped sharply in response to its 'Maiden Tribute' crusade in 1885 in which the editor 'procured' a 15-year-old girl as part of his paper's campaign to raise the legal age of consent. The *Daily News* was boycotted by some advertisers in 1886 when it campaigned for Home Rule. Government advertising long continued to be allocated on a partisan basis. As late as 1893 the incoming Home Secretary, Herbert Asquith, was told that generally 'it is the custom to transfer advertisements according to the politics of governments'.

Political prejudice in advertising selection almost certainly declined during the latter part of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The rise of advertising agencies, the emergence of major, national advertisers, and the increasing availability of circulation statistics encouraged the adoption of a more professional approach. Even so, the frequent remonstrations against 'mixing business and politics' in advertising manuals published

between 1850 and 1930 suggest that political prejudice continued to influence some advertisers.

But even when political partisanship played no part in advertising selection, left-wing publications still faced discrimination on commercial grounds. As the head of a well-known advertising agency wrote in 1856, 'some of the most widely circulated journals in the Empire are the worst possible to advertise in. Their readers are not purchasers, and any money thrown upon them is so much thrown away.' Newspapers read by the well-to-do were assessed differently. 'Character is of more importance than number,' advised an advertising handbook in 1851, adding that 'a journal that circulates a thousand among the upper or middle classes is a better medium than would be one circulating a hundred thousand among the lower classes.' Similar, though usually less extreme, advice continued to be given for a long time. For example Sir Charles Higham, the head of a large advertising agency, wrote in 1925, 'a very limited circulation, but entirely among the wealthy . . . may be more valuable than if the circulation were quadrupled.'<sup>6</sup>

Many advertisers also made a key distinction between the skilled and poor working class. Indeed the latter were often excluded from the early market research surveys in the 1920s on the grounds that they were not worth bothering about. Once newspapers became identified with the poor, they found it difficult to attract advertising. As an advertising handbook cautioned in 1921, 'you cannot afford to place your advertisements in a paper which is read by the down-at-heels who buy it to see the "Situations Vacant" column.'<sup>7</sup>

This combination of economic and political discrimination by advertisers crucially influenced the development of left-wing journalism. In the first place, it exerted pressure on the radical press to move up-market in order to survive. A number of radical newspapers redefined their target audience, and moderated their radicalism, in an attempt to attract the more affluent readers that advertisers wanted to reach.

This process is well illustrated by the career of *Reynolds News*. It was founded in 1850 by George Reynolds, a member of the left-wing faction of the Chartist National Executive. Reynolds had urged a 'physical force' strategy in 1848 and opposed middle-class collaboration in the early 1850s. His paper was initially in the *Northern Star* tradition of class-conscious radicalism, and had close links with the working-class movement.

Yet despite its radical origins, *Reynolds News* changed under the impact of the new economic imperatives of newspaper publishing. The fact that it never provided, even at the outset, a consistent theoretical perspective doubtless made it vulnerable to ideological incorporation. Inevitably it was influenced by the decline of radicalism in the country during the 1850s and early 1860s. But an important factor in its absorption was the need to attract advertising revenue. The change was symbolized by the inclusion of regular features on friendly societies in the year after the repeal of the advertisement duty, as a

ploy to attract advertising. Thus enterprises which had been regularly attacked in militant newspapers as ‘a hoax’ to persuade working-class people to identify with capitalism became a much-needed source of revenue for *Reynolds News*.

The paper continued to take a radical stand on most major events of the day, but it increasingly expressed the individualistic values of the more affluent readers it needed to attract. It adopted many of the tenets of political economy that it had so virulently attacked during the 1850s, even to the extent of accepting the palliatives of ‘prudent marriage’ (i.e. sexual restraint) and emigration as solutions to unemployment. It also concentrated on the common denominators of radicalism that united the lower-middle and working classes – attacks on the ‘vices’ of the aristocracy, privilege, corruption in high places, the monarchy, placemen, and the Church. Attacks on industrial capital were modulated to attacks on monopoly and speculators, while criticism of shopkeepers as the exploitive agents of capital gave way to articles that celebrated the expansion of the Victorian economy. *Reynolds News* became a populist paper catering for the coalition of lower middle-class and working-class readers necessary for its survival. Acquired by the Dicks family in 1879 and later by J. H. Dalziel, it gradually evolved into a conventional Liberal paper.

Reynolds was accused of commercial opportunism by contemporary critics (including Karl Marx). Yet it is difficult to see what else he could have done if the paper was to survive the transition to an advertising-based system. Even the radical *People’s Paper* boasted in 1857 of its appeal to ‘high paid trades and shopkeepers’ in its promotion to advertisers. Failing to attract affluent readers in sufficient numbers, the *People’s Paper* was forced to close down with a circulation far larger than middle-class weeklies like the *Spectator* and *John Bull*.

Radical newspapers could survive in the new economic environment only if they moved up-market to attract an audience desired by advertisers or remained in a small working-class ghetto, with manageable losses that could be met from donations. Once they moved out of that ghetto and sought a large working-class audience, they courted disaster. If they sold at the competitive prices charged by their rivals, they made a loss on each copy sold due to lack of advertising. If they increased their sales, they merely incurred greater losses and moved more heavily into debt.

This fate befell the London *Evening Echo*, which was taken over by wealthy radicals in 1901 and relaunched as a socialist paper. A special number was issued, firmly committing the paper to ‘the interests of labour as against the tyranny of organized capital’. In the period 1902–4 its circulation rose by a phenomenal 60 per cent, leading to its abrupt closure in 1905. The growth of advertising had failed to keep pace with the growth of circulation, making the continuance of the paper impossible.<sup>8</sup>

The same thing almost happened to the *Daily Herald* when it was relaunched as a daily in 1919. It spent £10,000 on promotion – a small amount by comparison with its main

rivals, but sufficient to ensure that it sharply increased its circulation. 'Our success in circulation', recalled George Lansbury, 'was our undoing. The more copies we sold, the more money we lost.' The situation became increasingly desperate when, partly aided by the unexpected publicity of attacks on the *Daily Herald* by leading members of the government alleging that it was financed from Moscow, the *Daily Herald's* circulation continued to rise in 1920. 'Every copy we sold was sold at a loss,' mourned Lansbury. 'The rise in circulation, following the government's attacks, brought us nearer and nearer to disaster.'<sup>9</sup> The money raised from whist drives, dances, draws, and collections was not enough to offset the shortfall of advertising. Even the expedient of doubling the paper's price in 1920 did not compensate for lack of advertising. Money from the miners and the railwaymen stopped the paper from closing. But the only way the paper could be saved, in the long term, was by being taken over as the official organ of the Labour Party and TUC in 1922. A paper that had been a freewheeling vehicle of the left, an important channel for the dissemination of syndicalist ideas in the early part of the twentieth century, became the official mouthpiece of the moderate leadership of the labour movement.<sup>10</sup> Lack of advertising forced it to become subservient to a new form of control.

In short, one of four things happened to national radical papers that failed to meet the requirements of advertisers. They either closed down; accommodated to advertising pressure by moving up-market; stayed in a small audience ghetto with manageable losses; or accepted an alternative source of institutional patronage.

Yet publications which conformed to the marketing requirements of advertisers obtained what were, in effect, large external subsidies which they could spend on increased editorial outlay and promotion in order to attract new readers. Rising advertising expenditure also provided a powerful inducement to entrepreneurs to launch publications directed at markets that advertisers particularly wanted to reach. Between 1866 and 1896 the number of magazines increased from an estimated 557 to 2,097, many of which were trade, technical, and professional journals aimed at specialized groups attractive to advertisers. The number of local dailies grew from only two in 1850 to 196 in 1900, falling to 169 by 1920 due mainly to the casualties caused by intense competition. There was also a substantial expansion in the number of local weekly papers from fewer than 400 in 1856 to an estimated 2,072 in 1900, declining to an estimated 1,700 by 1921. Above all, there was a substantial increase in the number of national daily and Sunday papers, mostly founded between 1880 and 1918, which catered either for mass, middle-market audiences or small elite audiences.<sup>11</sup>

This growth in the number of publications was accompanied by an enormous expansion in newspaper consumption. Annual newspaper sales rose from 85 million in 1851 to 5,604 million in 1920. Only part of this increase was due to rapid population growth: the number of newspapers purchased *per capita* over the age of 14 rose from six copies in 1850 to 182



copies in 1920. Even allowing for a reduction in the number of readers per copy, due to a marked decline in the collective purchase and reading aloud of newspapers, this still constitutes a remarkable increase in the audience reached by the press. Sunday and local daily papers achieved aggregate circulations of 13.5 million and 9.2 million respectively by 1920. In contrast the national daily press with a predominantly middle-class public had a circulation of only 5.4 million in 1920, while the local weekly press (which was particularly strong in rural areas) had a 6.8 million circulation.<sup>12</sup>

This growth was not simply the consequence of the sharp reduction in newspaper prices. Adult literacy (as measured very imperfectly by the ability to sign one's name) rose from 69 per cent in 1850 to 97 per cent in 1900. The normal number of hours worked in many industries fell from 60 hours a week to 54 hours or less between 1850 and 1890, and average real wages rose by an estimated 84 per cent between 1850 and 1900. These social changes provided the essential background for the expansion of the capitalist press with important consequences for the political development of modern Britain.

### Impact of the industrialized press

Traditional educationalists at the turn of the nineteenth century like Hannah More had taught working-class children to read but not to write. The intention had been to endow the working class with the ability to read what was good for them but to prevent them from writing anything that might be detrimental to the social order. Something approaching this division between consumption and production was institutionalized through the industrialization of the press.

Many of the new local dailies were started or bought by leading local industrialists. Both the *Northern Daily Express* and the *Northern Leader* were bought by colliery owners; the *South Shields Gazette* was acquired by Stevenson, a member of a local chemical manufacturing family; the *Bolton Evening News* belonged to local industrialists, the Tillotsons; the *Yorkshire Post's* principal shareholder was the Leeds banker, Beckett-Denison; the *Ipswich Express* was owned by Colman, the mustard manufacturer, and so on. These papers offered a very different view of the world from that of the early radical press they supplanted. Papers like the *Northern Star* had amplified class conflicts in the local community ('to talk of reconciliation between the middle and working classes in Leicester will, henceforth, be a farce'<sup>13</sup> was a typical lead-in to one of its news reports). In contrast the new local commercial press tended to block out conflict, minimize differences, and encourage positive identification with the local community and its middleclass leadership. Characteristic of this style of consensual journalism was a report in the *Leeds Mercury* (printed in the same city as the *Northern Star*) of a local dignitary addressing the annual public

soirée of the Leeds Mechanics Institute on the subject of ‘these popular institutions, sustained by the united efforts of all classes . . . thereby to promote the virtue, happiness and peace of the community’.<sup>14</sup>

The early militant press had fuelled suspicion of middle-class reformists with a barrage of criticism against ‘sham-radical humbugs’ and ‘the merciful middle-class converts to half Chartism at half past the eleventh hour’.<sup>15</sup> In contrast the new local daily press encouraged its readers to identify with the political parties controlled by the dominant classes. Ten of the new local dailies that emerged between 1855 and 1860 were affiliated to the Liberal Party; eighteen created between 1860 and 1870 were affiliated to the Tory or Liberal Party, and forty-one of the local dailies created in the following decade were similarly linked to the two great parties. The new party press played a central role in transforming what had been essentially aristocratic factions in parliament into mass political movements by mobilizing popular support behind them. It thus reinforced the division of the working-class movement through its absorption into rival parliamentary parties.

The new liberal press diluted the ideology of the early militant press to such an extent that it acquired a new, therapeutic meaning for the functioning of the social system. The co-operative ethos that would inform the new social order, proclaimed by some militant papers, became transmuted into the spirit of partnership between masters and men that would make the British economy prosper. The early radical stress on moral regeneration through social reconstruction became a celebration of moral improvement through the spread of middle-class enlightenment. And the value formerly attached to self-education as a means of ideological resistance to class domination gave way to a stress on the undifferentiated acquisition of ‘knowledge’ as the route to individual self-advancement and economic progress. Admittedly these transformations drew upon a radical tradition that contained contradictory elements within it. But by emphasizing the liberal rather than more radical lineaments of this tradition, the new press contributed to the disorganization of the working-class movement.

There were important differences between individual newspapers, particularly in relation to their coverage of trade unions. But notwithstanding these differences, all national newspapers launched between 1855 and 1910, and the overwhelming majority of new local daily papers, encouraged positive identification with the social system. The shift in the press that this represented is perhaps best illustrated by the way in which Queen Victoria was portrayed. Most radical papers in the period 1837–55 were aggressively republican: the Queen was vilified as politically partisan and reactionary, the head of a system of organized corruption, the mother of a brood of royal cadgers, and the friend and relative of European tyrants. In contrast the new press portrayed the Queen particularly from the mid-1870s onwards as a dutiful and benign matriarch, who symbolized in an almost talismanic way the moral and material progress of her reign. Projecting her as a living embodiment of national

unity, they also played a key role in converting the jubilee celebrations of 1887 and 1897 into popular, mobilizing rites of national communion.

Above all, the new popular press fostered the wave of imperialism that swept through all levels of society. It tended to portray Britain's colonial role as a civilizing mission to the heathen, underdeveloped world, and as an extended adventure story in which military triumphs were achieved through individual acts of courage rather than through superior technology. Common to both themes was pride in Britain's ascendancy: as the *Daily Mail* (23 June 1897), the most popular daily of late Victorian Britain, enthused:

We send out a boy here and a boy there, and the boy takes hold of the savages of the part he comes to and teaches them to march and shoot as he tells them, to obey him and believe in him and die for him and the Queen. A plain, stupid, uninspired people they call us, and yet we are doing this with every kind of savage man there is.

This celebration of Britain's dominion sometimes struck a more atavistic note as in this report of the 1898 Sudan expedition in the *Westminster Gazette*:

A large number of the Tommies had never been under fire before . . . and there was a curious look of suppressed excitement in some of the faces. . . . Now and then I caught in a man's eye the curious gleam which, despite all the veneer of civilization, still holds its own in man's nature, whether he is killing rats with a terrier, rejoicing in a prize fight, playing a salmon or potting Dervishes. It was a fine day and we were out to kill something. Call it what you like, the experience is a big factor in the joy of living.

The paper which celebrated 'potting Dervishes' was, in terms of the political spectrum represented by the contemporary national press, on 'the left'. It was, for example, one of the few papers not to join the press campaign for vengeance during the Boer War. However, it joined all other daily papers of note in providing uncritical, Hun-hating support for Britain's involvement in the First World War.

## Conclusion

In short, the radical press was decisively defeated after the abolition of the 'taxes on knowledge'. But its defeat cannot be attributed solely to the changed climate of opinion, following the collapse of the Chartist Movement. The '*zeitgeist*' or 'sovereign consumer' theory of the press and social change fails to account for why the press, taken as a whole,

moved further to the right than public opinion; nor does it explain why the subsequent revival of the radical movement did not give rise to a stronger revival of radical journalism. Both the extent and permanence of the eclipse of the radical press as the dominant force in national popular journalism was due to structural changes in the press industry. The industrialization of the press, with its accompanying rise in publishing costs, led to a progressive transfer of ownership and control of the popular press from the working class to wealthy businessmen, while dependence on advertising encouraged the absorption or elimination of the early radical press and stunted its subsequent development before the First World War.

### Notes

- 1 For the relative weakness of the radical press in 1910, see A. J. Lee, 'The radical press' in A. Morris (ed.), *Edwardian Radicalism 1900–1914* (London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974).
- 2 R. Pound and G. Harmsworth, *Northcliffe* (London, Cassell, 1959), p. 206.
- 3 A. J. P. Taylor, *Beaverbrook* (London, Hamish Hamilton, 1972), p. 175.
- 4 The costs of market entry for mass publishing were particularly high in Britain due to the dominant role of the national press. This partly explains why the radical press in Britain was much weaker than in some other European countries, where the press remained decentralized and entry costs were lower.
- 5 *Mitchell's Newspaper Press Directory* (Mitchell, 1856). It should be noted, however, that Mitchell himself cautioned advertisers against political bias.
- 6 *Mitchell's Newspaper Press Directory* (Mitchell, 1856); Anon., *Guide to Advertisers* (1851); C. Higham, *Advertising* (London, Williams & Norgate, 1925), p. 166.
- 7 C. Freer, *The Inner Side of Advertising: A Practical Hand-book for Advertisers* (London, Library Press, 1921), p. 203.
- 8 F. W. Pethick-Lawrence, *Fate Has Been Kind* (London, Hutchinson, 1943), pp. 65 ff.
- 9 G. Lansbury, *The Miracle of Fleet Street* (London, Victoria House, 1925), pp. 160 ff.
- 10 H. Richards, *Constriction, Conformity and Control: The Taming of the Daily Herald 1921–30* (Open University PhD thesis, 1993).
- 11 The figures for regional dailies relate to Britain and for other categories of publications to the UK, as reported in *Mitchell's Newspaper Press Directory*.
- 12 N. Kaldor and R. Silverman, *A Statistical Analysis of Advertising Expenditure and of the Revenue of the Press* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1948), p. 84.
- 13 *Northern Star*, 7 May 1842.
- 14 *Leeds Mercury*, 14 June 1851.
- 15 *Northern Star*, 26 February and 11 June 1842.

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*The era of the press barons*

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The era of the press barons is often seen as a maverick interlude in the development of the press when newspapers became subject to the whims and caprices of their owners. According to this view, the press barons built vast press empires and ruled them like personal fiefdoms. In the hands of men like Beaverbrook and Rothermere, newspapers became mere 'engines of propaganda' manipulated in order to further their political ambitions. As Baldwin said in a memorable sentence (suggested to him by his cousin, Rudyard Kipling), 'What proprietorship of these papers is aiming at is power, and power without responsibility – the prerogative of the harlot throughout the ages.'

The despotic rule of the press barons is usually compared unfavourably with a preceding 'golden age' when proprietors played an inactive role and 'sovereign' editors conducted their papers in a responsible manner. In some accounts, too, the era of Northcliffe and Rothermere is contrasted with the period after the Second World War when journalists became more educated, independent, and professional. The press barons have thus become favourite bogeymen: their indictment has become a way of celebrating the editorial integrity of newspapers, past and present.

But in reality the reign of the press barons did not constitute an exceptional pathology in the evolution of the press, but merely a continuation of tendencies already present before. Indeed in so far as the barons can be said to be innovators, it is not for the reasons that are generally given. They did not break with tradition by using their papers for political propaganda; their distinctive contribution was rather that they downgraded propaganda in favour of entertainment. Nor did they subvert the role of the press as a fourth estate: on the contrary it was they who detached the commercial press from the political parties and, consequently, from government. What actually happened is, in some ways, the exact opposite of the myth.

### **The creation of press empires**

The press chains created by the press barons in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were not a new phenomenon. Multiple ownership of weekly newspapers had developed as early as the eighteenth century largely because it enabled costs to be reduced through shared services. Local daily chains had also emerged shortly after the local daily press was established. By 1884, for instance, a syndicate headed by the Scots-American steel magnate, Carnegie, controlled eight dailies and ten weeklies.

Some of the papers controlled by the press barons gained a dominant market position. However, this too had happened before. *The Times*, for example, had dominated the daily press during the early Victorian period. This recurring pattern arose from the unequal competitive relationship that developed between strong and weak papers. As soon as one paper gained a market lead, it was in a strong position to lengthen its lead since it had more money from increased sales and greater scale economies to invest in its editorial product.

The press barons' empires were also swollen by the rapid growth of circulation that took place during their lifetimes. But a sustained increase of demand for newspapers had characterized the development of the press ever since the eighteenth century and had been particularly pronounced, as we have seen, in the period after the repeal of press taxes.

These three traditional features of the press – chain ownership, an expanding market, and a tendency for a few papers to become dominant – merely became more accentuated under the press barons. Between 1890 and 1920 there was a rapid acceleration of newspaper chains incorporating national as well as local papers. By 1921 Lord Northcliffe controlled *The Times*, the *Daily Mail*, the *Weekly* (later *Sunday*) *Dispatch*, and the *London Evening News*; his brother, Lord Rothermere, controlled the *Daily Mirror*, the *Sunday Pictorial*, the *Daily Record*, the *Glasgow Evening News*, and the *Sunday Mail*. Jointly they owned the large magazine group Amalgamated Press and their brother, Sir Lester Harmsworth, had a chain of newspapers in the south-west of England. Together they owned newspapers with an aggregate circulation of over 6 million – probably the press grouping with the largest sale in the western world at the time.<sup>1</sup> In addition the Hulton chain controlled three Sunday and four daily papers and the Pearson chain included nine daily and twenty-one local weekly papers.

Between the wars, concentration of press ownership entered a new phase, with the spectacular consolidation of the regional chains. The percentage of provincial evening titles controlled by the five big chains rose from 8 to 40 per cent between 1921 and 1939; their ownership of the provincial morning titles also increased, from 12 to 44 per cent during the same period. The power of the chains was further extended by the elimination of local competition. Between 1921 and 1937, the number of towns with a choice of evening

paper fell from twenty-four to ten, while towns with a choice of local morning paper declined from fifteen to seven.

The principal pacesetters in the expansion of the regional chains were the Berry brothers, Lords Camrose and Kemsley. Their group grew from four daily and Sunday papers in 1921 to twenty daily and Sunday papers in 1939. This was achieved only after a long-drawn-out and costly 'war' with Lord Rothermere, which was eventually resolved in a series of local treaties in which the three lords divided up different parts of the country between them.

During the inter-war period there was also an enormous increase in the sales of national dailies which overtook for the first time that of local dailies. Between 1920 and 1939 the combined circulation of the national daily press rose from 5.4 million to 10.6 million, while that of the local daily and weekly press remained relatively static. This major expansion of the London-based press meant that some proprietors commanded very large audiences, even when they owned relatively few papers. This was particularly true of Lord Beaverbrook whose small empire of only four papers included one market leader which pushed up the total circulation under his control to 4.1 million by 1937.

These changes in the ownership and readership of the press meant that, after the death of Lord Northcliffe in 1922, four men – Lords Beaverbrook, Rothermere, Camrose, and Kemsley – established a dominant position during the inter-war period. In 1937, for instance, they owned nearly one in every two national and local daily papers sold in Britain, as well as one in every three Sunday papers that were sold. The combined circulation of all their newspapers amounted to over 13 million.

However, there was a shift away from proprietorial domination of the press during the later part of the inter-war period. In 1937 the three leading Sunday papers' owners (Kemsley, Beaverbrook, and Camrose) controlled 59 per cent of national Sunday newspaper circulation – significantly less than the 69 per cent share of national Sunday circulation controlled by three less prominent proprietors (Dalziel, Riddell, and Lloyd) in 1910. Similarly in 1937 Rothermere, Beaverbrook, and Cadbury controlled 50 per cent of national daily circulation – again, much less than the 67 per cent share controlled by Pearson, Cadbury, and Northcliffe in 1910.

Underlying this shift was a decline in individual proprietorship and a successful assault on the major press groups. There was a revival of corporate press ownership during the inter-war period with the relaunch of the *Daily Herald*, the acquisition of *Reynolds News* by the Co-operative Movement, and the launch of the *Daily Worker* in 1930. The rise in publishing costs also resulted in a dispersal of newspaper ownership through the sale of shares so that three important papers – the *Daily Mirror*, *Sunday Pictorial*, and the *People* – ceased to have a dominant shareholder. The press magnates' hegemony over the press was, in fact, waning during the period celebrated for their ascendancy.

### Press barons and proprietorial control

Not all proprietors attempted to use their papers for political purposes. For instance, Astor, joint owner of *The Times* after 1922, was teased by his friends for not reading his own paper. Indeed even proprietors like Northcliffe, Rothermere, Beaverbrook, and Kemsley, who saw their papers as an extension of their own political views, did not exercise a uniform degree of control over all their papers.

Thus in the late 1930s Beaverbrook deluged the *Daily Express* with instructions to support appeasement ('No War Talk. NO WAR TALK', read one telegram of that period), but did not seem to mind that its sister paper, the *Sunday Express*, adopted a traditional patriotic hostility towards Germany, or that another of his papers, the *Evening Standard*, under the socialist editor Percy Cudlipp, urged a popular front against fascism. Similarly Northcliffe was mainly concerned in his later years with the *Daily Mail*, a preoccupation that his brother Rothermere later shared.

The two archetypal press barons, Northcliffe and Beaverbrook, had very different personal styles. While Northcliffe was notorious for personally harassing his staff, Beaverbrook's remoteness was legendary. In *Scoop*, Evelyn Waugh satirized a visit to him:

The carpets were thicker [as one approached Lord Copper's private office], the lights softer, the expressions of the inhabitants more careworn. The typewriters were of a special kind: their keys made no more sound than the drumming of a bishop's finger-tips on an upholstered prie-dieu. The telephone buzzers were muffled and purred like warm cats. The personal private secretaries padded through the ante-chambers and led them nearer and nearer to the presence.

Yet despite their differences of personality, both men exercised detailed control over their favourite papers through a constant barrage of instructions. Beaverbrook sent 147 separate instructions to the *Express* in one day. Northcliffe would sometimes phone his staff at 6 in the morning: 'Wake up! Have you seen the papers yet?' he would demand. One editor, who replied that you could not get the *Mail* in Northlake at 6 am, was woken up at 5 the next morning by a pantechinon backing into his garden, delivering a copy.

The press barons maintained their personal domination with extreme ruthlessness. Northcliffe, in particular, had a brisk way of dismissing employees. 'Who is that?' Northcliffe said on the phone. 'Editor, *Weekly Dispatch*, Chief,' came the reply. 'You were the editor,' responded Northcliffe. When a luckless subeditor filled a lull in conversation over lunch with the information that he had been shipwrecked three times, Northcliffe said abruptly, 'Four times'. Beaverbrook also had a fearsome reputation. 'Fleet Street', recalled one of his employees, 'was strewn with the corpses of *Express* editors.'<sup>2</sup>



The barons combined terror with generosity. Journalists' memoirs and official histories are full of anecdotes about the sudden gifts, holidays, and salary rises which were showered on staff. As a genre these stories could be called 'Courageous underling gets his reward'. They usually take the form of the plucky journalist standing up for himself (or, more rarely, for what he believes) in the face of the baron's fury. They are clearly intended to enhance both the baron, who is revealed as discriminating and fundamentally rightminded in his judgements, and the journalist, whose independence is demonstrated by his courage. But what they actually reveal is an almost continuous process of humiliation. Bernard Falk, usually rewarded with a cigar when he took down Northcliffe's dictated social column for the *Mail*, was once allowed to choose the one he wanted. 'What!' said Northcliffe, 'You have the nerve to pick on those cigars! Don't you know, young man, that they cost 3/6 each?' 'Yes,' said the intrepid reporter, 'but they're worth every penny.' Another editor who dared to disagree with Northcliffe recorded gratefully the telegram he received: 'My dear Blackwood, you are grossly impertinent to your affectionate Chief.'

Losing a battle with a baron hardly made such a good story. Buckle, the editor of *The Times* (whose editorial independence Northcliffe had promised to uphold), was eased out of the editorship when he failed to adapt to the political views and managerial strategy of the Chief. Lewis Macleod, literary editor of the *Mail*, received a communiqué from Northcliffe: 'This is the last occasion on which I can tolerate Macleod's gross neglect and carelessness. He will read this message out to the editorial conference on Monday.' When Northcliffe was angered by what he thought were defects on the *Daily Mail's* picture page, he lined up all involved in its production and put the tallest man in charge. Feeling dissatisfied with the *Mail's* advertising department, he appointed the commissionaire to vet advertisements. Beaverbrook was also unpredictable though not on the scale of Northcliffe.<sup>3</sup> Yet behind both men's seemingly random acts of ferocity and generosity, there was often a careful regard for self-interest. Beaverbrook ensured that many of his best journalists wrote under pseudonyms so that, if they left the *Express*, they could not take the goodwill of their copy with them.

Northcliffe and Beaverbrook shaped the entire content of their favourite papers, including their layout. Thus Northcliffe raged at an employee at *The Times*, 'What have you done with the moon? I said the moon – the *Moon*. Someone has moved the moon! . . . Well, if it's moved again, whoever does it is fired!' (The position of the weather report had been changed.) Beaverbrook and Northcliffe constantly pestered journalists about the language and phrasing of their reports. 'To Eastbourne's balding, myopic, Edinburgh-trained physiotherapist, William John Snooks, 53, came the news that. . .' parodied Tom Driberg, a former *Express* journalist, in the approved Beaverbrook style. Both press barons also interfered in the choice of pictures. 'Alfonso' (the King of Spain), complained

Northcliffe, 'is always smiling. This smile is not news. If you get a picture of Alfonso weeping, *that* would be news!'

The barons' personal foibles influenced the selection of news stories, thereby helping to form what are now the news values of the national press. Northcliffe had a lifelong obsession with torture and death: he even kept an aquarium containing a goldfish and a pike, with a dividing partition, which he would lift up when he was in need of diversion. His obsession was reflected in his first magazine, *Answers*, which dealt with such enquiries as, 'How long is a severed head conscious after decapitation?' The first feature article Northcliffe wrote for his first evening newspaper described the day he spent with a condemned murderer in Chelmsford jail. He later briefed *Daily Mail* staff to find 'one murder a day'. Similarly Beaverbrook, a hypochondriac, told the editor of the *Daily Express* that 'The public like to know . . . what diseases men die of – and women too.'

Proprietors' perceptions of their readers set the tone of their papers. The *Daily Express* aimed, in Beaverbrook's words, at 'the character and temperament which was bent on moving upwards and outward', reflecting Beaverbrook's own New World ethic, with its celebration of the self-made. The *Daily Mail*, on the other hand, projected a more static, hierarchical world in keeping with Northcliffe's more traditional brand of conservatism and catered, as Northcliffe patronizingly put it, for 'people who would like to think they earned £1,000 a year'.

The proprietorial control exercised by the press magnates did not represent, however, a decisive break with the past. Indeed Lucy Brown's recent revisionist account of the Victorian commercial press even argues that 'what is an important and unvarying generalization is that the sovereign powers of decision were exercised by the proprietors and not by the editors'. Many of the Victorian editors celebrated for their independence, such as C. P. Scott of the *Manchester Guardian* (1877–1929), were either the owners of the papers they edited or members of the proprietorial family. Other leading editors prove, on close examination, to have been less autonomous than has usually been claimed. Even Delane of *The Times*, often seen as a model of the sovereign editor, was repeatedly excluded from key planning decisions affecting the development of his paper. Indeed he was so convinced that he was going to be sacked, at one stage, that he started 'taking dinners' in order to be eligible to practise as a barrister. Others were less fortunate: Cook, Gardiner, Massingham, Greenwood, Annand, Watson, and Donald were only some of the distinguished editors who were compelled to resign between 1880 and 1918 as a result of political disagreements with their proprietors.

The tradition of editorial sovereignty which the press magnates allegedly destroyed was, to a large extent, a myth. The press barons were no different from their immediate predecessors in involving themselves in the editorial conduct of their papers. What made them aberrant, to some extent, was that they were also business managers concerned with

every aspect of their press groups from production to promotion. Yet even this difference should not be overstated since some of the earlier pioneers of 'popular' journalism, notably Edward Lawson and Edward Lloyd, were also active commercial as well as editorial managers.

### **Profits and politics**

The press barons have been portrayed by historians primarily as journalistpoliticians – a view of themselves which they publicly cultivated. Beaverbrook, for instance, told the first Royal Commission on the Press that he ran the *Daily Express* 'merely for the purpose of making propaganda and with no other motive'. Yet this simple image has tended to obscure another, more important aspect of their dominion over the press.

The press barons were forced by economic pressures to seek increasingly large circulations. Intense competition resulted in rising levels of paging, bigger editorial staffs, and, above all, massive promotion. Northcliffe and Rothermere led the way by spending, up to 1928, approximately £1 million on the *Daily Mail's* readers' insurance scheme in order to attract more readers. Rival press magnates fought back with competitions offering lavish prizes and their own readers' insurance schemes. After a legal judgement in 1928 outlawed newspaper competitions as lotteries, promotion shifted towards free gifts. Teams of canvassers moved through the countryside offering surprised housewives anything from cameras and wristwatches to silk stockings and tea-kettles, in return for taking out a newspaper subscription. The promotion for the *Daily Herald* alone is estimated to have amounted to £1 per new reader between 1930 and 1932. Even in 1937, when the 'circulation war' had abated, a typical national daily newspaper employed five times as many canvassers as editorial staff.<sup>4</sup> The effect of this heavy promotion and rising editorial outlay was to force up costs, and therefore the circulations that popular newspapers needed to achieve in order to stay profitable.

Publishers were consequently under increasing pressure to give more space to material with a general appeal to less differentiated audiences. The editorial implications of this were spelt out in market research, which most leading publishers commissioned during the 1930s, into what people read in newspapers. A major survey, based on a national quota sample of over 20,000 people and commissioned by the *News Chronicle* in 1933, revealed, for instance, that the most-read news in popular daily papers were stories about accidents, crime, divorce, and human interest. They had a near-universal appeal. In contrast most categories of public affairs news had only an average or below average readership rating. This was because, although some aspects of public affairs had an above-average readership among men and people over the age of 35, they had a weak appeal among women and the young. Public affairs content was thus, in marketing terms, a commodity with a sectional appeal. It lacked,

moreover, the passionate following amongst a large minority commanded by sport, and it also lacked the appeal to advertisers possessed by some minority consumer features.

Pressure to maximize audiences consequently resulted in the progressive downgrading of political coverage. By 1936 six out of a sample of seven papers devoted more space to human interest content than to public affairs – indeed, in some cases three or four times as much.<sup>5</sup> The one exception was the *Daily Herald*, which allocated 33 per cent of its editorial content to public affairs – substantially more even than the *Daily Telegraph*. The *Daily Herald's* commitment to political coverage reflected the concerns of its TUC-nominated directors. For the press barons, profits mattered more than politics.

This shift away from the traditional concept of a newspaper to a magazine miscellany was part of a long-term trend dating back to the mid-nineteenth century. It accelerated, however, during the inter-war period. Thus between 1927 and 1937 the *Daily Mail's* sports coverage rose from 27 to 36 per cent of its total news, while home political, social, and economic news fell from 10 to 6 per cent of total news content.<sup>6</sup>

The quality press remained more faithful to the traditional concept of the newspaper, despite the fact that market research showed that the most-read news items in quality dailies were very similar to those in popular papers.<sup>7</sup> However, quality newspapers were protected from the economic pressure to build large circulations because over two-thirds of their revenue came from advertising secured by reaching small, élite audiences. Advertising thus discouraged quality papers from adopting popular editorial strategies by making it financially disadvantageous for them to dilute the class composition of their readership.

### **The rise of the 'fourth estate'**

The press barons are usually accused of using their papers as instruments of political power. But they were hardly unique in this. What made the press magnates different is that they sought to use their papers, not as levers of power within the political parties, but as instruments of power against the political parties. The basis of the Establishment's objection to men like Rothermere and Beaverbrook was not that they were politically ambitious, but that they were politically independent.

In the early twentieth century the majority of London-based daily papers were owned by wealthy individuals, families, or syndicates closely linked to a political party. Between 1911 and 1915, for instance, funds from the Unionist Central Office were secretly paid through respectable nominees to the *Standard*, *Globe*, *Observer*, and *Pall Mall Gazette*. A wealthy Conservative syndicate, headed by the Duke of Northumberland, bought the Tory *Morning Post* in 1924. Similarly Lloyd George engineered the purchase of the *Daily News* in 1901 by the Cadbury family in the Liberal interest, and arranged the purchase of the *Daily Chronicle*

in 1918 through a syndicate headed by Dalziel with money accumulated through the sale of honours and laundered through the Lloyd George Fund.

This pattern of political control was undermined by the growth of advertising expenditure (mostly on the press) which nearly trebled from £20 million in 1907 to £59 million in 1938. This funded an escalating rise in editorial and promotional spending, and increasingly made papers too expensive for political parties and their supporters to sustain. Pearson refused to dig deeper into his pocket to keep the *Westminster Gazette* going in the Liberal interest after 1928; Lloyd George and his associates were forced to sell the *Daily Chronicle* in 1928 to the Inveresk chain; the TUC gave up financial control of the *Daily Herald* to the Odhams Group in 1929; no Tory syndicate could be found to prevent the *Daily Graphic* from closing in 1926 or the *Morning Post* disappearing in 1937.

The enormous expansion of advertising weaned the national press from dependence on the political parties. Although most major press barons were Tories, they were first and foremost newspapermen. With the exception of papers controlled by Beaverbrook in his early days, all their publications were subsidized solely by advertising, and consequently were free to operate entirely independently of political patronage. An independent 'fourth estate', prematurely announced in the mid-nineteenth century, came much closer to reality during the inter-war period, under the aegis of the press barons.

Beaverbrook and Northcliffe played an important part in the political revolt that unseated Asquith as premier in 1916, and established Lloyd George in his place. After the war they adopted a more unconventional, outsider role. Between 1919 and 1922 Rothermere, aided by Northcliffe, unleashed a violent propaganda campaign against 'squandermania', urging extensive cuts in public spending, the abandonment of wartime planning controls, and the sale of publicly owned enterprises. When the Coalition government partially rejected these policies, Rothermere appealed directly to the country by backing the Anti-Waste League in parliamentary by-elections in 1921. Three Anti-Waste League candidates succeeded in winning at Dover, Westminster St George's, and Hertford. Although these victories were not matched by by-election gains elsewhere, Rothermere had demonstrated the strength of grassroots Conservative opposition to government policies. Partly in response to this pressure, the Ministries of Shipping, Munitions, and Food were abolished, a wide range of public controls was lifted, and publicly owned factories and shipyards were sold to private enterprise.

The Anti-Waste Campaign petered out with the break-up of the Coalition government in 1922, and its replacement by a Conservative administration backed by the press barons. But Beaverbrook and Rothermere later became persuaded that Britain's economic problems could be solved by converting the Empire into a free trade zone protected by a high tariff wall. Unable to convince the Conservative Party leadership, they again made an independent foray into politics by backing the United Empire Party (UEP) and campaigning in October 1930 for its by-election candidate, Vice-Admiral Turner, in the safe Tory seat of Paddington. The UEP

candidate won unexpectedly, and this was followed by another by-election upset at East Islington where Labour won and the official Conservative candidate was beaten by the UEP into third place. This precipitated a revolt within the Conservative Party. Sir Robert Topping, the chief Conservative agent, wrote a memorandum saying that the party leader, Stanley Baldwin must go, which was subsequently endorsed by most leading Conservatives consulted by Neville Chamberlain, the party chairman. Baldwin, for a time, agreed to go quietly, telling the chairman bitterly that 'the sooner, the better' suited him.

Stanley Baldwin decided in the end to stay and fight, staking his political career on the outcome of the parliamentary by-election at Westminster St George's. Mounting a brilliant political campaign in which he shifted attention from empire free trade to the unaccountable power of the press barons, he helped the official Conservative candidate, Duff Cooper, to win with a comfortable majority. Thereafter Baldwin's personal position was safe, though he was sufficiently shaken to make what was, in effect, a peace treaty with Beaverbrook shortly after the by-election.

The impetus behind the empire free trade campaign was broken by the 1931 crisis, the collapse of the Labour government, and the landslide election victory won by the Coalition administration headed by Ramsay MacDonald. It was also weakened by lack of enthusiasm in the Dominions for the press barons' grand design. Nevertheless, Beaverbrook and Rothermere succeeded in strengthening the imperialist wing within the Conservative Party and some imperial preference policies were implemented during the 1930s. This was more than Joseph Chamberlain, the great apostle of empire free trade, achieved during the nineteenth century despite his explosive impact on late Victorian politics.

Rothermere subsequently came out in support of the British Union of Fascists (BUF) in 1934. His papers pumped out stirring calls like 'Give the Blackshirts a Helping Hand' (*Daily Mirror*, 22 January 1934) and 'Hurrah for the Blackshirts' (*Daily Mail*, 15 January 1934). The *Evening News*, under his control, even ran a competition for the best letter on the theme of 'Why I like the Blackshirts'. This support from a mass-circulation press thrust a relatively obscure organization into the limelight and contributed to an increase in its membership. But Rothermere withdrew his support after little more than five months, thereby helping to deny the BUF the legitimacy which it needed in order to attract substantial right-wing 'respectable' support.

### **The press barons and the social order**

Some historians have interpreted the relative failure of the press barons to persuade people to vote for the new political parties and causes they championed as evidence that they exercised no significant political power. Thus A. J. P. Taylor writes, 'Though people bought

Northcliffe's papers for their news, they were no more impressed by his political sense than that of any other successful businessman.' But to define the impact of the press barons in terms appropriate to pressure groups is to misunderstand the nature of their influence. Their main impact lay in the way in which their papers provided cumulative support for conservative values and reinforced opposition, particularly among the middle class, to progressive change.

The papers controlled by the press barons conjured up imaginary folk devils that served to strengthen commitment to dominant political norms and to unite the centre and the right against a common enemy. The most prominent of these public enemies were British Marxists controlled from Moscow. The first ineffectual Labour coalition administration formed in 1924 was branded a Marxist-dominated regime by the press barons' papers, even though it showed little signs of pursuing radical policies during its short period in office. In the subsequent general election campaign, the 'red peril' campaign reached new heights. 'Civil War plot by Socialists' Masters,' screamed the *Daily Mail's* (25 October 1924) front page banner headline, heading a report of a letter supposedly sent by Zinoviev (President of the Third Communist International in Moscow) to the British Communist Party. Although the letter was patently a forgery, it was given massive, largely uncritical publicity by all the press barons' papers, and was shamelessly exploited to define the choice before the electorate as a simple one between moderates and Marxists, British civilization or alien domination. 'Vote British, not Bolshie,' urged the *Daily Mirror* (29 October) in its front page headline. Underneath it printed the simple question in heavy type, 'Do You Wish to Vote for the Leaders of Law, Order, Peace and Prosperity?' (with reassuring pictures of Lloyd George, Baldwin, Asquith, and Austen Chamberlain), 'or to Vote for the Overthrow of Society and Pave the Way to Bolshevism?' (with sinister pictures of Russian leaders).

It is doubtful whether such crude propaganda deterred many would-be Labour voters – not least because the majority of working people did not read a daily paper in 1924 (unlike ten years later). Although the Labour Party lost forty seats, its share of the vote increased by 3.2 per cent largely because it fielded sixty-four more candidates. But the effect of the sustained red scare in the press was to polarize the election between left and right. The centre vote collapsed, with the Liberal Party being reduced from 158 to 40 seats. The hysteria whipped up by the press also contributed to a massive increase in turn-out, which rose by over 2 million compared with the previous general election held less than a year before. The combined effect of Liberal defections and higher turn-out increased the Conservative vote and resulted in a landslide Tory victory.

The press also tended to select and interpret the news within a dominant framework. Most national newspapers, for instance, portrayed the 1926 General Strike as a conflict between a minority and the majority. By framing the dispute in this way, they detached strikers from their class base and obscured the true nature of the conflict. The minority–

majority paradigm also offered an explanation of the strike: it was the work of communist militants opposed to the democratically elected government and the rule of the majority. 'The defeat of the General Strike', declared the *Daily Mail* (14 May 1926), 'will end the danger of communist tyranny in Europe.' The portrayal of strikers as a threatening minority also served to legitimate political retribution as a collective act of self-defence. 'Trade unionists in this country', declared the *Observer* (16 May 1926), 'are and always will be a minority, and if they seriously try to break the majority, they make it quite certain that the majority, if further provoked, will break them.' A similarly persuasive and traditionalist framework was deployed in explaining the recession. It was widely portrayed as a 'natural catastrophe', comparable to a hurricane or flood. In this way, the appropriate response was defined as national unity in the face of a common calamity rather than radical new policies.

The press controlled by the barons helped to sustain the dominant culture by stigmatizing radical opponents of the political order. The communist-dominated Unemployed Workers' Movement, for instance, received hostile coverage when it organized marches of unemployed workers from Scotland, Wales, and the north of England all converging on London early in 1929. The *Daily Mail* (24 February 1929) called it 'a weary tramp to advertise Reds', while *The Times* (11 January 1929) called it 'heartless, cruel and unnecessary'. In common with most other papers, they deflected attention from the issue of unemployment by defining the protest mainly in terms of the threat it posed to law and order. Significantly, the press provided much more sympathetic coverage of the 1936 Jarrow March, which had the support of both Conservative and Labour councillors and a much more limited political goal. The press thus helped to police the boundaries of legitimate dissent.

The central core of the conservatism expressed by papers under the barons' control was a deep and emotional attachment to Britain and her Empire. This intense patriotism sometimes shaded off into open racism and, particularly in the case of the papers controlled by Rothermere, aggressive anti-semitism. The *Daily Mail* (10 July 1933) explained, for instance, the background to Hitler's rise in this way:

The German nation was rapidly falling under the control of its alien elements. In the last days of the pre-Hitler regime there were twenty times as many Jewish government officials in Germany as had existed before the war. Israelites of international attachments were insinuating themselves into key positions in the German administrative machine.

Such interpretations of the rise of fascism in Europe served to reinforce popular anti-semitism in Britain and contributed to the maintenance of Britain's restrictive immigration policy which prevented some German Jews from finding refuge in Britain.



### Modification of economic controls

Although the press became more independent of political parties and of government, it operated within an economic framework which limited the range of voices that could be heard. The rise in publishing costs during the interwar period, largely funded by advertising, sealed off entry into the national newspaper market. With one exception, no new national daily or Sunday newspaper was successfully established between 1919 and 1939, largely because of the prohibitive cost of starting new papers. The one exception – the Communist *Sunday Worker*, launched in 1925 and converted into the *Daily Worker* in 1930 – was boycotted by distributors, and was so underfinanced that it existed only on the margins of publishing with a circulation of well under 100,000.

The easiest way to break into national newspaper publishing was to buy an established newspaper. But even this still required substantial expenditure to develop and promote the title that had been acquired. The level of investment needed was beyond the readily available resources of the Co-op when it took over *Reynolds News*. Indeed the triumphant rise of the *Daily Herald* would never have happened on such a spectacular scale if Odhams had not acquired a 51 per cent interest in the paper in 1929 and spent £3 million on its relaunch. Carrying twice as many pages as before, equipped with a northern as well as a London printing plant, and very heavily promoted, the *Daily Herald* increased its circulation from a little over 300,000 in 1929 to 2 million in 1933. Without this backing by one of the country's largest publishing conglomerates (based on a serious commercial miscalculation since, though the *Daily Herald* was a popular success, it was a financial failure), even Labour's official voice would have been muzzled by the capital requirements of mass publishing.

The persistence of advertising discrimination against left publications acted as a further brake upon their development. *Reynolds News*, for instance, received only 0.82d per copy in gross advertising revenue in 1936, less than half that obtained by the *Sunday Express* (1.9d per copy) and less than one-eighth of that bestowed on the *Sunday Times* (6.4d per copy).<sup>8</sup> Left publications were also forced to close down with circulations far higher than those of their respectable rivals. Thus the *Clarion* closed in 1933 with a circulation of over 80,000 copies – more than four times that of the *Spectator* and ten times that of the *Economist*. Even massive circulations were not enough to attract some mass-market advertisers. In 1936 the *Daily Herald* obtained less than half the gross advertising revenue per copy of the smaller circulation *Daily Mail*.

But advertising hostility to the radical press was not as great during the inter-war period as it had been before. The standard advertising textbook of the 1930s advised that 'the first test that must always be applied to a press advertising medium is the cost of placing an

advertisement of a given size before a given number of suitable readers.’ While this precept was not new, the ability to put it into effect was. Circulation figures became more reliable during the 1920s and this trend was consolidated by the establishment of the Audit Bureau of Circulation in 1931. Survey research into the size and social composition of newspaper readership was introduced on a commercial basis in 1924 and obtained official endorsement from the advertising industry in 1930.

The provision of reliable statistical data encouraged a more impersonal approach to advertising selection, based on quantifiable cost criteria, in which political value judgements played a less important part. Readership research also caused advertisers to reassess stereotyped images of the readers of left publications as being ‘down at heel’. For instance, the 1934 official readership survey showed that the *Daily Herald* was read by more middle-class people than *The Times* (even though the *Herald’s* readership was predominantly working class).

The development of market research in the 1920s also helped radical publications by underlining the importance of the working-class market. Typical of the shift of orientation among many advertisers during this period was Sun-Maid Raisins, which changed its advertising from high-class women’s magazines to mass market media in 1929 because research ‘shows that 91.2 per cent of the families of Great Britain have incomes of under £400’.<sup>9</sup> The adoption of more sophisticated methods of analysis reinforced this more positive valorization of the working-class market. ‘Inequalities of consumption’, concluded the principal marketing manual of the mid-1930s, ‘are less than inequalities of income, and inequalities of income are less than inequalities of wealth.’<sup>10</sup> A similar message was put rather less abstractly in the trade promotion of Odhams, the publisher of the *Daily Herald*, *John Bull*, and other working-class publications. As one of their advertisements proclaimed, ‘If the housewives who read *John Bull* put their purses together next year, they could buy the Giaconda diamond or Da Vinci’s “Mona Lisa” hundreds of times over, then they could spend the change on the richest treasures of Bond Street or the Rue de la Paix.’

Selling the working class to advertisers was made easier by the growth of working-class purchasing power, and the related growth of large-scale production of mass market goods. *Per capita* annual consumer expenditure at constant (1913) prices rose from £42 in 1921 to £54 in 1938, a large increase that reflected the rise of real wages among working people in employment during the Depression. This contributed to an enormous increase in the purchase of branded products like cosmetics, medicines, bicycles, and electrical appliances.

These cumulative changes were of crucial importance in enabling the *Daily Herald* to gain in influence and circulation. Although it obtained only a fraction of the advertising

revenue per copy of its main rivals, it was still able to pick up over £1.5 million in gross advertising receipts by 1936. Without this backing, the *Daily Herald* would have been forced to double its price and so lose circulation. Even this might not have been enough to cover the losses incurred by its very heavy promotion and expanding circulation. Indeed despite its increased advertising, the *Daily Herald* was still trading at a loss when it became the western world's largest circulation newspaper in 1933.

Changes in the orientation of advertisers contributed to another important development in the press – the relaunch of the *Daily Mirror* and *Sunday Pictorial*. In the early 1930s the *Daily Mirror* seemed to be a dying paper. Although it had a disproportionately middle-class readership, it was denied the usual benefits of reaching an affluent audience because most advertisers then subscribed to the mistaken view that tabloid papers were read only sketchily. In addition, its circulation was declining by about 70,000 a year and had dropped below 800,000 by 1933. In anticipation of its closing, the *Daily Mirror* was deserted by its principal owner, Rothermere.

Rothermere's disengagement enabled the paper to change direction. Bartholomew was created editorial director in 1933, and the paper was skilfully steered towards a gap in the market. Advertisers' traditional orientation towards middle- and lower-middle-class readers had encouraged the lower end of the market to be neglected. However, the shift in the outlook of many advertisers indicated that a paper which recruited new working-class readers would get advertising support. The inspiration behind the paper's relaunch was essentially a marketing one, and this was reflected in the close involvement of a leading advertising agency, J. Walter Thompson (JWT), in every stage of the paper's rebirth. JWT carried out market research into readers' preferences, advised on layout, relinquished members of its staff to become key members of the new *Mirror* team, and, above all, urged its clients to back the new venture with advertising.

A change in market direction for the *Daily Mirror* required a corresponding shift in the paper's politics. As Cecil King, the paper's advertising director put it,

Our best hope was, therefore, to appeal to young, working-class men and women. . . . If this was the aim, the politics had to be made to match. In the depression of the thirties, there was no future in preaching right-wing politics to young people in the lowest income bracket.

The political shift of the *Daily Mirror* was nevertheless cautious. It backed Baldwin as Prime Minister in the 1935 general election, gradually adopted an anti-appeasement policy, but drew back from anything as extreme as support for the Labour Party. It also

developed an ambivalent social identity that mirrored its political uncertainty, combining traditional features about debutante balls with racy articles aimed at young working people.

Although commercial pressures encouraged an editorial adjustment, they actively discouraged the *Daily Mirror* from moving too far down-market or editorially too far to the left. The *Mirror's* management became nervous about alienating its traditional, predominantly conservative, and disproportionately middle-class readership. They also became even more apprehensive about the paper becoming stereotyped as a working-class tabloid at a time when working-class audiences generated much less advertising than middleclass audiences. Indeed the *Daily Mirror* even undertook a promotion campaign in the advertising trade press boasting of its upper-class, 'A' readership (the top 5 per cent of the country). 'Only one of the six popular national papers', the *Daily Mirror* declared in 1938, 'can claim more "A" class readers.'

The really important change in the *Daily Mirror*, however, was not its flirtation with reformist politics, but its relegation of politics in favour of material with a wider appeal to women and young readers. Between 1927 and 1937 the *Daily Mirror* cut by half the proportion of its news devoted to political, social, economic, and industrial issues.<sup>11</sup> The shift meant that, in 1936, the *Daily Mirror's* coverage of domestic public affairs was less than half that of its sports coverage, and little over one-third of its coverage of crime, sex, and other human interest content. Even more striking, its analysis of public affairs, whether in the form of editorials or feature articles, accounted for a mere 2 per cent of its editorial content.<sup>12</sup> The *Daily Mirror's* relaunch constituted a key moment in the incorporation of the press by the entertainment industry.

The relaunch of the *Daily Mirror* was extremely successful. Its circulation rose to 1.5 million by 1939 and, after an initial period of difficulty, its advertising revenue also increased substantially. The *Mirror's* success prompted a similar marketing operation on its sister paper, the *Sunday Pictorial*, in 1937, under the aegis of Cecil King and Hugh Cudlipp. The *Sunday Pictorial* also moved away from right-wing politics and a middle-class social identity without becoming left wing or working class. 'Our "A" class readership', the *Sunday Pictorial* reassured advertisers, 'is greater than that of any other Sunday paper.'

Advertising patronage still inhibited the development of radical journalism. Yet the rise of working-class living standards, and changes in the way in which advertisers selected media, had encouraged part of the popular press to move away from right-wing politics. The foundation had been laid for the development of a powerful social democratic press that would press for reform in the different social and economic context of the Second World War.

## Notes

- 1 Circulation figures for the inter-war period are not entirely reliable. The principal sources for circulations used in this chapter have been T. B. Browne's annual *Advertisers' ABC*; Royal Commission on the Press 1947–9 Report (London, HMSO, 1949); N. Kaldor and R. Silverman, *A Statistical Analysis of Advertising Expenditure and of the Revenue of the Press* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1948); W. Belson, *The British Press* (London, London Press Exchange Ltd, 1959); the Audit Bureau of Circulations; and individual publishers.
- 2 In fact most of Beaverbrook's senior editors kept their jobs for exceptionally long periods of time, though this was less true of his more junior employees.
- 3 Northcliffe's unpredictability increased to the point of insanity, possibly induced by syphilis.
- 4 *Report on the British Press* (London, Political & Economic Planning, 1938), p. 132.
- 5 The relative proportion of space devoted to different categories of article is what is significant in discussing the evolution of the newspaper as a genre rather than absolute changes, which vary according to the volume of paging. For a different view, see Ralph Negrine, *Politics and the Mass Media in Britain*, 2nd edition (London, Routledge, 1994). Our content analysis was based on a sample of twelve issues of each daily, and six issues of each Sunday paper, in 1936. Public affairs is defined as political, social, economic, industrial, scientific and medical affairs. For a summary of the results, see chapter 7.
- 6 *Royal Commission on the Press 1947–9 Report*, Appendix 7, p. 250.
- 7 *A Survey of Reader Interest (News Chronicle, 1934)*.
- 8 'A statistical survey of press advertising during 1936' (London Press Exchange Ltd records). The figures exclude certain forms of classified advertising.
- 9 'The Sun-Maid plan 1929–30' (J. Walter Thompson Ltd records).
- 10 G. Harrison and F. C. Mitchell, *The Home Market: A Handbook of Statistics* (London, Allen & Unwin, 1936), p. 6.
- 11 *Royal Commission on the Press 1947–9 Report*, Appendix 7, pp. 257–8.
- 12 See note 5. This represented a reduction in real terms during the period 1927–37, notwithstanding the increase in the size of the *Daily Mirror* and the rise in the proportion of its editorial content devoted to news.

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*The press under public regulation*

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Nostalgia has encouraged the belief that the British people closed ranks with bulldog determination under the unchallenged leadership of Churchill during the Second World War. This mythical view obscures the political and social crisis of the early war years, which led to a major confrontation between the government and the left press.

Many senior politicians and officials doubted the commitment of the British people to winning the war. A significantly named Home Morale Emergency Committee of the Ministry of Information reported in June 1940 on ‘fear, confusion, suspicion, class feeling and defeatism’. Even the ministry’s parliamentary secretary, Harold Nicolson, confided in his diary during this period, ‘It will now be almost impossible to beat the Germans.’<sup>1</sup> For at least the first two and a half years of the war, the relationship between the authorities and the press was dominated by a constant and probably misplaced concern about the state of public morale.

This anxiety was combined with growing concern amongst conservative politicians and civil servants about the growth of radicalism in Britain. In February 1942 the Home Intelligence Division reported a wave of admiration for Soviet Russia and a growing suspicion amongst sections of the working class that financial vested interests were hampering the war effort. A month later it commented on what was to become a familiar theme – the flowering of ‘home-made Socialism’ of which important elements were ‘a revulsion against “vested interests”, “privilege”, and what is referred to as “the old gang”’ and ‘a general agreement that things were going to be different after the war’.<sup>2</sup> In these circumstances, left-wing criticism in the press took on an added meaning. Not only did it seem, in the eyes of some, to be undermining military discipline and impeding efficient production, but it was also adding to political divisions at home when the nation desperately needed to be united against the common enemy. Indeed the maintenance of public morale came close to being equated by some ministers and officials with suppressing radical criticism of any kind.

Yet a succession of military defeats provoked mounting attacks on 'the old gang'. In 1940 Neville Chamberlain was forced to resign as Prime Minister. The new Coalition government under Churchill also came under growing attack as the military situation deteriorated. A cumulative political crisis developed which was only partially defused by changes in the Cabinet and leadership of the armed forces in 1940, 1941, and 1942. Press censorship thus became part of a beleaguered administration's battle for survival.

The circumstances of the Second World War also called for special measures. The strategic objective of the blitz was not only to impede war production but also to destroy the ability and will of the civilian population to service the war effort. This inevitably made regulation of the press an even more sensitive issue than it had been during the First World War.

### **Censorship and resistance**

Amid mounting fears of invasion in the summer of 1940, the government issued regulations which gave the Home Secretary sweeping powers to control the press. The most important of these was Regulation 2D which gave the Home Secretary the personal power to ban any publication which published material 'calculated to foment opposition to the prosecution to a successful issue of any war in which His Majesty is engaged'. The regulation also denied the offending publication any automatic right of appeal or recourse to the law courts. As one angry MP declared, 'Its effect will be to put the Ministry of Home Security in a position by no means inferior, as regards the scope of its powers over newspapers, to that occupied by the distinguished Dr Goebbels in Germany.'<sup>3</sup>

A major campaign was organized against these new measures. Leading members of the old political establishment, including Lloyd George, were mobilized, and much of the press joined in the protest. Concerted opposition was mounted in the Commons with the result that the government secured ratification of the regulations by only thirty-eight votes – the smallest majority on any issue gained by the new government. This opposition was important because it secured two vital concessions that limited the way in which the regulations were subsequently implemented. First, Sir John Anderson, the Home Secretary, gave an undertaking that no amendments would be made to the regulations without parliamentary consultation. Cabinet memoranda show that three months later this pledge was effective in blocking moves to ban publications which were deemed to 'disrupt the unity of effort' in the country.<sup>4</sup> Secondly, Sir John Anderson indicated in the Commons that the regulations would apply only to papers opposed to the continuance of the war. When government ministers later wanted to close down a pro-war paper, they felt it necessary to reinterpret the scope and purpose of the regulations. This created a delay which enabled effective opposition to be organized.

### **Silencing the Communist press**

Following a unanimous Cabinet decision, the Communist *Daily Worker* and the *Week* were closed on 21 January 1941. The *Daily Worker* had modified its anti-fascist editorial policy, following the signing of the Nazi-Soviet pact in 1939, and attacked the war as a struggle between imperialist powers. The ostensible ground for banning the two papers was that they were impeding the war effort by setting people against the war. This was not borne out by research undertaken by the Ministry of Information, which indicated that both publications had little influence on public attitudes. The *Daily Worker* accounted for less than 1 per cent of total national daily circulation, while the *Week* had an even smaller audience.

But if the two papers did not damage public morale, they disturbed the peace of mind of some government ministers. The *Daily Worker* campaigned on a number of sensitive issues – notably the inadequacy of deep shelters and civil defence preparations – which the government was not in a position to remedy in the short term. The *Daily Worker* also published vituperative attacks – including a cartoon portraying Bevin, the Minister of Production, as being in the pay of capitalist bosses – which caused deep personal offence.

The ban on the two papers was also part of a wider government campaign against Communism in Britain which was being organized by the interdepartmental Committee on Communist Activities, including representatives from the Foreign Office and MI5, strongly supported by leading right-wing ministers. That the ban was motivated, in part, by political prejudice – and not simply by a concern about the papers' impact on public morale – is confirmed by the unwillingness of the authorities to allow the *Daily Worker* to start publication again when the British Communist Party came round to fullhearted support of the war.

The government chose to close down the two Communist papers by ministerial decree rather than prosecute them through the law courts. Summary execution was preferred, partly because the government feared that it might lose the case and partly because, as a private memorandum from the Home Secretary explained, a law suit would provide the *Worker* with 'a good opportunity for propaganda against what it would describe as the government's effort to "gag" the press'.<sup>5</sup> Although the government's actions clearly amounted to an attack on press freedom, the self-appointed watchdogs against the abuse of executive power were mostly silent or approving. When the Home Secretary informed the Newspaper Proprietors Association of the ban, only one person objected. In parliament the more successful of the two motions opposing the government's actions attracted only eleven votes.



### Harassment of the left press

The assault on the Communist press was part of a wider move to curb criticism from left papers. The *Daily Herald*, which had been outspokenly critical during the early stages of the war, moderated its tone when the Labour Party joined the coalition. Pressure was brought to bear upon the paper through its TUC-nominated directors. Appeals to loyalty also helped to subdue criticism of the government in *Reynolds News*, the paper of the Co-operative Movement. But the *Daily Mirror* and *Sunday Pictorial*, which moved sharply to the left during the war, were much more difficult to deal with. They were not controlled by the labour movement, nor were they answerable to a dominant shareholder (as the Cabinet discovered after a secret investigation into the shareholders of the two papers).

At first, pressure was exerted informally through a series of meetings between senior members of the government and directors of the two papers. When this failed, Churchill urged a more direct approach. Both papers, he argued in a Cabinet meeting on 7 October 1940, published articles that were subversive. He went on to suggest that a conspiracy lay behind this criticism. 'There was far more behind these articles', Churchill warned, 'than disgruntlement or frayed nerves. They stood for something most dangerous and sinister, namely an attempt to bring about a situation in which the country would be ready for a surrender peace.'<sup>6</sup>

The new Home Secretary, Herbert Morrison, asked for time to consider the issue. The next day he circulated a sharply worded memorandum to his Cabinet colleagues in which he suggested that 'there is much in the papers (*Daily Mirror* and *Sunday Pictorial*) which is calculated to promote a war spirit. They seem to be clearly anxious for the defeat of Hitlerism.' After arguing that government action would be counterproductive, he concluded: 'It is a tradition of the British people that they still remain obedient to the constituted authorities while retaining their liberty to ridicule and denounce the individuals who are actually in authority.'<sup>7</sup>

An unlikely struggle developed in which Morrison, the archetypal machine politician, vigorously defended press freedom against Churchill, a former journalist famous for his eloquent speeches in defence of liberty. In the next Cabinet meeting, Churchill accused the *Daily Mirror* and *Sunday Pictorial* of 'trying to rock the boat' and demanded 'firm action to deal with this menace'. He was strongly supported by, among others, Sir John Anderson who was in favour of issuing a warning to the two papers and then closing them down if they did not change their attitude. Morrison opposed this, arguing that such action would divide the Commons on party lines and amount to 'interference with the liberty of the press'.

In the end the Cabinet agreed, at Beaverbrook's suggestion, to exert pressure on the two papers through the Newspaper Proprietors Association (NPA). A meeting was arranged

between Beaverbrook and Attlee, representing the government, and the NPA. The proprietors were warned that compulsory censorship might be introduced if the *Daily Mirror* and *Sunday Pictorial* were not more restrained. The proprietors protested strongly against compulsory censorship at the meeting, but they subsequently urged the senior management of the *Daily Mirror* and *Sunday Pictorial* to exert a moderating influence on their staff. The effect of this intervention was limited. 'We shall pipe down for a few weeks,' Cecil King, a director of both papers, commented in his diary.

Churchill's allegations that the two papers were motivated by a desire to secure 'a surrender peace' was unjustified. Both papers were totally committed to winning the war. Indeed they had opposed appeasement with Germany before anti-appeasement had become government policy: they had also backed Churchill for the leadership on the grounds that he would push for a more vigorous prosecution of the war. Indeed, at times, the *Daily Mirror* assumed almost the John Bull style of the prime minister: 'We appeal to every worker and every employer to play the man . . . stick to your job unless it is foolhardy to do so' (30 September 1940). The *Sunday Pictorial* was no different. Pillorying Lloyd George as 'the Marshal of the weak and the terrorized' when he proposed a negotiated settlement, it had even less time for pacifists. 'Put the lot behind barbed wire,' it urged.

The real reason for the attack on the two papers was that they had become increasingly critical of the government. The *Sunday Pictorial* (29 September) called the reverse at Dakar 'another blunder' while the *Daily Mirror* referred pointedly to 'futile dashes at remote strategic points'. Both papers began also to urge social reform at home. But they left no doubt in the minds of their readers that victory against Hitler was what mattered most. 'However bad the "pluto-democratic" world may be', declared a *Daily Mirror* columnist, 'it is at least better than the depravity that would suppress all independent action and thought under the devilish way of life commended by Nazi fanatics.'

Clashes between the government and the *Mirror* and *Pictorial* recurred throughout 1941 and early 1942, largely because both sides had irreconcilable views about what constituted the national interest.<sup>8</sup> Leading Conservative ministers believed that criticism of officers in the *Daily Mirror* – including a reference to 'brassbuttoned boneheads, socially prejudiced, arrogant and fussy' – served to undermine the respect for rank that was the basis of good discipline in the army. They also felt that the *Daily Mirror's* calls for post-war reconstruction were needlessly introducing political controversy and dividing the nation at a time of national emergency. The *Daily Mirror*, with an average circulation of 1,900,000, had become in their view a serious obstacle to winning the war.

*Daily Mirror* journalists, on the other hand, saw themselves as contributing to the war effort. They argued that Britain, in its hour of need, could not afford the incompetence that arose from snobbery and privilege: responsible jobs should go to those selected on the basis

of ability rather than of birth. And plans for a new deal after the war were not divisive in a society already divided by class inequalities: on the contrary a programme for 'winning the peace' would help win the war by motivating people to contribute even more to the war effort.

These differences flared up into a full-scale confrontation in March 1942. The occasion, though not the cause, of the confrontation was a cartoon published in the *Daily Mirror* by Zec which showed a torpedoed sailor adrift on a raft in the open sea with the caption: 'The price of petrol has been increased by one penny – official.' This was interpreted by Churchill and many of his Cabinet colleagues to be an irresponsible attack upon the government for sanctioning oil company profiteering at the expense of people's lives. Its real intention was quite different: Zec meant it as an attack upon the needless waste of petrol by dramatizing the human sacrifice involved in shipping oil to Britain. This was how it was understood by most people, according to a Home Intelligence Report, as well as by most MPs who commented on it in a subsequent Commons debate.<sup>9</sup>

The misconceptions about the Zec cartoon were symptomatic of the demoralization within the Cabinet. In the three months preceding the confrontation with the *Daily Mirror*, the allies had suffered defeats at Guam, Wake, Hong Kong, Manila, the Dutch East Indies, Rangoon, Benghazi, and Singapore. In the embattled atmosphere of Cabinet discussions, the press came to be blamed by ministers on the left as well as the right for some of the things that were going wrong. Bevin, the Labour Minister, demanded in a highly emotional state, 'how was he to "press" people almost into the Merchant Navy if they were then to see the suggestion (in the Zec cartoon) that they were being "pressed" in order to put the price of petrol up for the owners?' The *Daily Mirror*'s staff had become scapegoats for failure. 'We will flatten them,' Churchill told his Information Minister, Brendan Bracken.<sup>10</sup>

The assault on the *Daily Mirror* was part of the government's struggle for political survival. A *Daily Mirror* editorial on 16 February 1942 came very close to demanding a new administration:

The assumption that whatever blunders are committed, and whatever faults are plainly visible in organization, we must still go on applauding men who muddle our lives away, is a travesty of history and a rhetorical defiance of all the bitter lessons of past wars.

This indictment was published at a time when a number of insiders thought that the government could be forced to resign. Churchill himself believed that he might be ousted. 'My diary for 1942', writes a member of Churchill's personal entourage, 'has the same backcloth to every scene: Winston's conviction that his life as Prime Minister could be saved only by victory in the field.' Even the general public, previously more loyal to the

premier and his administration than the political élite, showed signs of turning against Churchill in early 1942.<sup>11</sup>

The attack on the *Daily Mirror* was thus a pre-emptive strike against the government's principal critic. Its purpose, as discussion amongst Cabinet ministers made clear, was not only to silence the *Daily Mirror* but also to intimidate the rest of the press into adopting a less critical stance. Churchill demanded the immediate closure of the *Daily Mirror* in a full Cabinet meeting on 9 March 1942. The matter was referred to a Special Committee under the chairmanship of Sir John Anderson. The committee was advised by the law officers (rather surprisingly in view of the terms in which censorship regulations had been introduced) that it was legal to close down the *Daily Mirror* because, although it supported the war, it impeded its 'successful prosecution'. Indeed the Lord Chancellor urged immediate suspension of the paper since the experience of the last war suggested that quick, decisive action would be effective. 'When the then Home Secretary quite illegally suppressed the *Globe* newspaper,' he recalled, '... there was a row in the House in one debate in which the government received overwhelming support, and nothing was ever heard of the *Globe* newspaper again.'<sup>12</sup>

The committee did not, however, endorse the proposal to close the *Mirror* although it suggested that 'it would be helpful if an example could be made' to curb press criticism. Those opposed to an immediate ban stressed that 'it was clear from the debates in parliament at the time when Regulation 2D had been enacted that it would be used to deal with Communist, Fascist or Pacifist Anti-War agitators' – but not, they pointed out, 'for the purposes now suggested'. There had to be a public redefinition of the government's censorship powers before anything could be done.<sup>13</sup>

At this stage a near consensus had been reached in favour of banning the *Daily Mirror*. The hawks, who wanted immediate suspension, had been strengthened by the recruitment of Bevin, the only trade union leader in the Cabinet. The opposition of the doves, on the other hand, had weakened. They stood out for giving the *Daily Mirror* one last chance in which to reform itself, while at the same time seemingly consenting to the paper's suppression if it did not 'improve'. Even Morrison, the principal dove and the minister who would be responsible for carrying out Cabinet policy, apparently agreed that if the *Daily Mirror* people 'did not amend I would suppress them'.<sup>14</sup>

Morrison announced that Defence Regulation 2D empowered the government to ban pro-war papers which undermined the war effort, even if the offence was not intentional but merely arose from a 'reckless and unpatriotic indifference'. He added that the *Daily Mirror* would be banned without further notice unless 'those concerned recognized their public responsibilities'. The same warning was given personally to the *Daily Mirror*'s senior management, and a report of the meeting released to the press.

Most members of the government clearly did not anticipate the storm of protest that followed. A large group of MPs demanded a special debate in the Commons. In a packed

House a Liberal MP, Wilfred Roberts, aptly quoted an article published in the USA by the Minister of Information, Brendan Bracken. In this Bracken had argued that ‘the savage censorship imposed on the French press played no small part in the fall of France. It encouraged defeatism, and bred complacency. A blindfolded democracy is more likely to fall than to fight.’ A Labour MP, Frederick Bellenger, then cited an article written by Herbert Morrison during the First World War in which he had urged all soldiers not to fight ‘your German brother’ in an imperialist struggle. Morrison was pointedly asked why he was not now extending the same freedom of expression to others.

As the debate progressed, it became clear that it was the government rather than the *Daily Mirror* which was on trial. While loyal Conservative MPs rallied to Morrison’s defence, the great majority of Labour and Liberal MPs were opposed. The Coalition administration was confronted, as Morrison had feared, with an issue that divided the Commons along party political lines.

Newspaper proprietors and editors were also not as compliant as they had been over the closure of the *Daily Worker*. While many Sunday and local papers supported the government, the majority of national daily papers sided with the *Mirror*. It thus became clear that closing down the *Daily Mirror* would lead to a major confrontation with a powerful section of the press.

The strength of opposition was such that the *Daily Mirror* was never really in any danger of being closed down after March 1942. Thereafter official displeasure took the form of harassment, such as Churchill’s personal request that Cecil King be conscripted into the armed forces.<sup>15</sup> The victory was not, however, entirely one-sided. The *Daily Mirror*’s outspoken radicalism became more subdued and the paper’s most controversial columnist, Cassandra (Connor), decided it was time to join the army.

The defence of the *Daily Mirror* overlapped with a major campaign to lift the ban on the *Daily Worker*. Mass rallies were organized in Trafalgar Square and in London’s Central Hall. The Labour Party Annual Conference voted down its national executive’s recommendation by backing the ending of the ban. The Cooperative Congress and the Scottish TUC followed suit. In the face of this escalating pressure from the organized working class, the government relented. The ban on the *Daily Worker* was lifted on 26 August 1942 – more than a year after the USSR had become one of Britain’s closest allies.

### **The defeat of censorship**

The *Daily Mirror* and *Daily Worker* campaigns were part of a wider victory. The government rejected general schemes for compulsory censorship of the press. It also turned down an insidious proposal for allocating rationed newsprint to publications

according to their contribution to the war effort. The notorious Regulation 2D was never invoked again after the closure of the *Daily Worker*.

Admittedly, the government drew back from taking full advantage of its censorship powers partly because the press proved, on the whole, to be cooperative. The Chairman of the Newspaper Emergency Council, for instance, wrote to the Ministry of Information in 1939 that 'our respective tasks and duties are complementary.'<sup>16</sup> Some editors even took the Ministry of Information to task for being too permissive in its advisory guidelines. The press, including critical and independent-minded papers like the *Daily Mirror*, consciously sought to bolster public morale at the expense of objective reporting. Coercive censorship was made, to some extent, unnecessary by self-censorship.

The authorities were also restrained from exercising greater control over the press through purely pragmatic considerations. Military censorship of dispatches sent by war correspondents accompanying the armed forces provided a discreet means of regulating uncomfortable news. A number of senior Ministry of Information officials also became convinced that compulsory censorship was unnecessary, once they came round to the view that public morale was holding up. Some also felt that the credibility of a largely co-operative press would be undermined if it was seen to be directly controlled by the government. These arguments from the Ministry of Information helped to deflect more authoritarian attempts to censor newspapers. When the military situation improved after the summer of 1942, and the position of Churchill's administration became secure, ministers also became notably less sensitive to criticism.

But widespread commitment to the ideal of a free press also played an important part in stopping illiberal politicians like Churchill and Anderson from taking control of the press. Press freedom was one of the symbols of democracy that Britain was defending against Nazi Germany. This became a rallying slogan for anti-censorship campaigns which the government could not easily ignore. When a senior official in the Ministry of Information wrote that 'it would be improper to propose in this country either a moral or a political censorship of opinion, for that would be contrary to the last 300 years of English history', he added a significant postscript: 'It would also be perilous in view of the recent events surrounding the *Daily Mirror* and *Daily Worker* and the parliamentary and public attention that has been paid to them.'<sup>17</sup> In resisting the abuse of arbitrary censorship powers, relatively obscure politicians like Bellenger and Roberts, along with a large number of now-forgotten labour movement activists, kept alive the tradition of an independent press. The political processes of a democratic society saved the government from itself.

### Freedom from commercial controls

Ironically it was partly the government's economic intervention in the press industry that caused leading politicians to be subject to such unwelcome scrutiny by left-wing newspapers. Newsprint was rationed, on a statutory basis, from 1940 in order to husband a scarce resource and ensure its equitable distribution. An unintended effect of this control was to liberate the press from some of the economic pressures that had previously inhibited the development of radical journalism.

Newspaper managements voluntarily curtailed the amount of advertising they took because newsprint rationing reduced papers to less than one-third of their pre-war size. This self-imposed rationing was formalized in 1942 by new regulations which restricted the proportion of newspaper space that could be allocated to advertising. As a consequence, the money that people paid for their papers once again made a substantial contribution to the finances of the press. London-based dailies, for instance, derived 69 per cent of their revenue from sales in 1943, compared with only 30 per cent in 1938.

Newsprint rationing also redistributed advertising expenditure. Newspapers which had difficulty attracting advertising before the war found agencies begging them to take their orders due to the general shortage of advertising space. This meant that radical editorial policies and low-paid readerships no longer carried a financial penalty.

These changes did not in themselves account for the sharp move to the left made by some papers during the war. The experience of the war changed the outlook of journalists and expanded the demand for radical journalism. As A. C. H. Smith has shown, a radicalizing rapport developed between the *Daily Mirror* and its audience. Readers' letters and documentary-style reporting influenced the tone and orientation of the paper, helping it to acquire a distinctively working-class voice. But while economic controls did not cause the wartime transformation of the *Daily Mirror* and *Sunday Pictorial*, they provided the economic environment that made the shift possible.

Economic pressures had restrained both papers from moving further to the left in the late 1930s. But the wartime liberation from advertisers meant that they could aim solely at a working-class readership. They could also develop clear political identities in keeping with their more homogeneous audiences. Survey research shows that the *Sunday Pictorial* entered the war with a disproportionately middle-class readership and re-emerged after the war with a mainly working-class one. Similarly the *Daily Mirror* had the most cross-sectional readership of all national dailies in 1939, but its readers were solidly proletarian by 1947. The readership of both papers was also overwhelmingly Labour immediately after the war.

Newsprint rationing also reduced the polarization between quality and popular papers. Popular papers were no longer under intense pressure to seek ever larger audiences because circulation levels were 'pegged' during much of the war. By reducing costs and redistributing

advertising, newsprint controls also increased the profitability of many newspapers. These changes coincided with a new interest not only in war news, but also in public affairs in general. As a consequence the proportion of space devoted to public affairs doubled in all wartime popular national dailies, save in the already politicized *Daily Herald*.

Wartime controls thus contributed to the development of a radical and less entertainment-oriented press. The aggregate circulation of the *Daily Mirror* and *Sunday Pictorial*, combined with that of the *Daily Herald*, *Reynolds News*, and *Daily Worker*, amounted to nearly 9 million copies in 1945. This formidable grouping of papers was supplemented by the progressive *Picture Post*, an illustrated weekly with a readership (as distinct from circulation) of well over 4 million people. Not since the mid-Victorian period had the left been so well represented within the press.

These publications provided a strong impetus behind social democratic change in wartime Britain. This can be illustrated by the reception given to the Beveridge Report, published in 1942, which provided the basis of many of the reforms later implemented by the Attlee government. The report was hailed by the left press with banner headlines, congratulatory editorials, and detailed summaries of its recommendations. It 'will so much break the old order', proclaimed the *Sunday Pictorial* (6 December 1942), 'that it will rank as little short of a Magna Carta for the toiling masses in Britain'. According to the *Daily Herald* (2 December 1942) the report was a 'massive achievement'. The *Daily Mirror* (2 December 1942) was scarcely less lyrical. Anticipating counter-arguments, it also published a sober article by Beveridge entitled, 'Britain Can Afford It'. The report also received sympathetic coverage from liberal papers such as the *News Chronicle* and *Manchester Guardian*, and even from the conservative *Daily Mail*. As Cecil King noted at the time, 'The volume of press support is so great that it seems to be assumed in the House that it will be politically impossible to drop the Report.'

What might have been a relatively obscure official document which the Tory Minister of Information had initially wanted to be published quietly, was transformed with the help of press publicity into a cornerstone of the new consensus. Indeed a British Institute of Public Opinion survey in 1943 found that no fewer than 86 per cent of people wanted the Beveridge Report to be adopted. Radical newspapers were thus helping to lay the foundation for Labour's 1945 landslide victory more than two years before Labour's election campaign even began.

In short, public regulation during the Second World War helped rather than hindered the growth of radical journalism. Government attempts to silence the radical press were largely defeated, while official economic controls had the effect of making the press more responsive to changes in the public mood. State intervention proved to be, on balance, a liberating rather than a repressive influence.



## Notes

- 1 Ministry of Information (INF) 1/250, Report to Policy Committee (June 1940); H. Nicolson, *Diaries and Letters 1930–45* (London, Collins, 1967), p. 96
- 2 INF 1/292, Home Intelligence Weekly Report 73 (16–23 March 1942), Appendix.
- 3 *Parliamentary Debates*, 363 (1940), col. 1,307.
- 4 CAB 66/12, WP 402 (40) (8 October 1940).
- 5 CAB 66/14 (23 December 1940).
- 6 CAB 65/9, WM 267 (40) (7 October 1940).
- 7 CAB 66/12, WP 402 (40) (8 October 1940).
- 8 See, for instance, W. Armstrong (ed.), C. King, *With Malice Toward None* (London, Sidgwick & Jackson, 1970), pp. 94–9 and 103–7.
- 9 H. Cudlipp, *Walking on the Water* (London, Bodley Head, 1976), pp. 134–6; INF 1/282 Home Intelligence Weekly Report 78 (23–30 March 1942); *Parliamentary Debates* 378 (1942), cols 2,233–308.
- 10 Simon, CAB 66/23, WP 124 (42) (17 March 1942); Bevin and Churchill cited in A. J. P. Taylor (ed.), *Off the Record: W. P. Crozier, Political Interviews 1933–43* (London, Hutchinson, 1973), pp. 311 and 325.
- 11 Eden cited in J. Harvey (ed.), *The War Diaries of Oliver Harvey 1941–5* (London, Collins, 1978), p. 94; Churchill cited in Lord Moran, *Winston Churchill* (London, Sphere, 1968); INF 1/292 Home Intelligence Weekly Report 72 (February 1942).
- 12 In fact the *Globe* was suspended only briefly.
- 13 CAB 65/25, WM 35 (42) (18 March 1942).
- 14 A. J. P. Taylor (ed.), *Off the Record: W. P. Crozier, Political Interviews 1933–43* (London, Hutchinson, 1973), p. 325.
- 15 Cecil King was medically unfit for the armed forces. This was the reason why he had not joined up in the first place.
- 16 INF 1/187, Letter to Censorship Bureau (10 September 1939).
- 17 INF 1/238, Memorandum from R. H. Parker (15 April 1942).

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## *The press in the age of conglomerates*

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The leading historian of the British press, Stephen Koss, portrays the postwar period as the apotheosis of political journalism. 'By 1947', writes Koss, 'the party attachments of papers – as they had been understood to operate over the preceding hundred years – were effectively abandoned.' The press became fully independent of political parties and hence government, thus completing the 'halting transition from official to popular control'.<sup>1</sup>

This supposedly resulted in a marked improvement in the quality of political reporting and analysis. According to Koss,

newspapers grew steadily more catholic and less partisan in their ordinary news coverage. When confronted by a general election, they usually expressed a party preference, but always with at least a gesture of pragmatism and often for a different party from the one they had previously endorsed.

This more open-minded style of journalism is attributed by Koss to the emergence of a new type of proprietor who was 'a businessman first and foremost', oriented towards what sold rather than what furthered a party interest or ideological viewpoint. The man who 'personified' this pragmatic, undoctinaire approach, in Koss's judgement, is Rupert Murdoch, whose 'papers, both in Britain and elsewhere, lurched from one party persuasion to another for reasons that were seldom articulated and manifestly more commercial than ideological'.

This analysis is broadly echoed by many other accounts of the post-war press. Their common theme is that newspapers were emancipated not only from party tutelage but also from the personal dominion of press magnates. According to John Whale, for instance, 'the newspaper's staff is left to get on with the job' in the modern press because many of the new proprietors 'have global problems of trade and investment to occupy their minds'. Like Koss, he sees control of the contemporary press as residing increasingly in the market-place.

Like all persuasive mythologies, these portrayals connect to an element of truth. But their overall assessment is misleading because they inflate shortlived trends into permanent transformations, and ignore developments which run counter to their conclusions. The post-war press was not transformed, in reality, by the arrival of 'market democracy'.

### **The re-emergence of interventionist proprietors**

During the immediate post-war period a substantial section of the press remained subject to the personal control of aggressively interventionist proprietors: the second Viscount Rothermere, Beaverbrook, Camrose, Kemsley, and, after 1948, David Astor. The Labour movement papers, the *Daily Herald* and *Reynolds News*, were also tethered to the editorial line laid down by their political masters.

However, this hierarchical pattern of control gave way to a greater delegation of editorial authority in the regional press and in a growing section of the national press. The person who typified this change was Lord Thomson, who acquired the Kemsley empire in 1959 and *The Times* in 1967. Within the framework of an agreed budget, his editors enjoyed a high degree of autonomy. Publicly he declared, 'I do not believe that a newspaper can be run properly unless its editorial columns are run freely and independently by a highly skilled and dedicated professional journalist.' His British editors have broadly corroborated this statement. Harold Evans, for instance, could recollect only one occasion in his fourteen years as editor of the *Sunday Times* when he received political guidance from Lord Thomson: the proprietor, he was told in 1974, would be unhappy if the *Sunday Times* supported the Labour Party in the forthcoming general election.

Fleet Street became less hierarchical in the 1960s and early 1970s. The *Daily Herald* was freed from following the Labour Party line; Sir Max Aitken proved to be less dictatorial than his father, Lord Beaverbrook; Astor's proprietor-editor regime at the *Observer* came to an end; and, perhaps, most important of all, Cecil King was ousted in 1968 after authorizing a front-page article in the *Daily Mirror* calling for the removal of the Prime Minister and the establishment of a national government without discussing the matter with the paper's editor. King's lordly action was in the seigneurial tradition of his uncle, Lord Northcliffe: his dismissal by his fellow directors in response to what they called his 'increasing preoccupation with politics' seemed, at the time, to signify the end of an era.

These changes in the control of the press coincided with the rise of specialist correspondents. Their number increased and they acquired a greater degree of autonomy than general reporters. As Jeremy Tunstall's research in the late 1960s showed, specialist correspondents tended to hunt in packs and to regularly exchange information and ideas with each other. This fostered the development of a group consensus and encouraged journalists to resist pressure from their news desks.

The devolution of authority within newspaper organizations, at a time of broad political consensus, encouraged a more bipartisan approach to political reporting and commentary. This was reflected, for instance, in the growing number of newspapers which invited politicians to write articles opposing the editorial line of their leaders during general election campaigns. But although the interventionist tradition of proprietorship waned during the 1960s, it did not disappear. This was highlighted by a private management inquiry commissioned by publishers, which concluded in 1966:

When all allowances have been made for variations within the industry, its most striking feature, and possibly its greatest problem, is its dominance by a small number of highly individualistic proprietors with their own personal interests and philosophy of management.

This was clearly a reference to the proprietorial regimes at the *Telegraph*, *Express*, and *Mail* groups.

The extent to which political partisanship declined during the post-war period has also been overstated. Thus Stephen Koss's sweeping claim that national newspapers 'often' supported 'a different party from one they had previously endorsed' proves, on close inspection, to be inaccurate. The *Daily Express*, *Daily Mail*, *Daily Mirror*, *Daily Telegraph*, *Daily Sketch*, *Daily Herald*, and *News Chronicle* each backed with unwavering loyalty the same political party in post-war general elections.<sup>2</sup> Only *The Times*, before the 1980s, and the *Guardian* approximate to Koss's mythical norm.

Moreover, national newspapers became markedly more partisan from 1974 onwards. This was partly in response to the growing polarization of British politics. But it also reflected the cumulative impact of a new generation of partisan, interventionist proprietors. The extent of their editorial involvement has perhaps been exaggerated by the recent spate of journalists' memoirs and reminiscences which have tended to focus on untypical periods of conflict between proprietors and editors caused by changes of ownership and editorial strategy. But they leave no doubt that Koss's portrayal of Murdoch and other contemporary proprietors as market-led pragmatists is deeply misleading.

Indeed Koss's claim that the political orientation of Murdoch's papers fluctuated in response to the shifting currents of public opinion could not be further from the truth. Murdoch's British papers moved to the right because he became increasingly right-wing. Moreover these changes were imposed by Murdoch regardless of the views of his readers. The *Sun* switched from Labour to Conservative in the February 1974 general election despite the fact that over half of its readers were Labour supporters. After 1975 it developed into a partisan Thatcherite paper *in opposition* to the opinions of its readers (only 40 per cent of

whom supported the Conservatives even in the 1987 general election).<sup>3</sup> Only in 1997 did it support New Labour, while retaining an explicit commitment to new right policies. Similarly, *The Times* and the *Sunday Times* became under his control Thatcherite papers at a time when political partisanship was weakening and the political centre was gaining in support. Only *Today*, acquired by Murdoch in July 1987, exhibited some independence, though within strict bounds. It developed a green tinge, returned to the Conservative fold in time for the 1992 general election, strayed briefly to the left and was closed down.

Murdoch also imposed an editorial reorientation of his papers in Britain through a personalized style of management reminiscent of the earlier press barons. 'I did not come all this way', he declared at the *News of the World*, 'not to interfere.' Stafford Summerfield, its long-serving editor, found to his dismay that the new proprietor 'wanted to read proofs, write a leader if he felt like it, change the paper about and give instructions to his staff'. A series of clashes with Murdoch, partly over the issue of whether the editor should be accountable to the paper's board or to Murdoch personally, hastened Summerfield's departure.

A subsequent editor of the *News of the World*, Barry Askew, also records Murdoch's extensive editorial interventions when he was in London. 'He would come into the office', Askew recalls, 'and literally rewrite leaders which were not supporting the hard Thatcherite line.' Askew, who was not a Thatcherite enthusiast, lasted only nine months.

Murdoch reconstructed the *Sun* by working closely with a talented but compliant editor, Sir Larry Lamb, whom he had handpicked for the job. But he adopted a more circumspect approach towards *The Times* and *Sunday Times*. During his bid for Times Newspapers in 1981, he was asked whether he would change their character. 'Oh no, no, I would not dream of changing them at all,' he had replied. But to assuage sceptical critics, Articles of Association and independent directors were imposed at Times Newspapers with the intention of preserving their editorial independence.

Although Murdoch never issued a direct editorial instruction to the editor of the *Sunday Times*, Frank Giles, he made his views forcibly known. 'Murdoch, the paper spread out before him,' Giles recollects, 'would jab his fingers at some article or contribution and snarl, "what do you want to print rubbish like that for?" or pointing to the by-line of a correspondent, assert that "that man's a Commie".' Further pressure was funnelled through Gerald Long, the new managing director appointed by Murdoch, prompting the editor to establish a dossier called the 'Long Insult File'. Undermined by a series of calculated humiliations (on one occasion, Murdoch entertained guests by firing an imaginary pistol at his editor's back), Frank Giles retired early. His replacement was a more reliably Conservative journalist, Andrew Neil, who moved the paper further to the right. 'Rupert expects his papers', according to Neil, 'to stand broadly for what he believes: a combination of right-wing republicanism from America mixed with undiluted Thatcherism from Britain . . .'

The editor of *The Times*, Harold Evans, recalls similar pressure from his proprietor. Murdoch 'creates an aura', recollects Evans.

The aura he created in 1981–2 was one of bleak hostility to Edward Heath and the Tory rebels, and contempt for the Social Democrats. He did this by persistent derision of them at our press meetings and on the telephone, by sending me articles marked worth reading which espoused right-wing views, by jabbing a finger at headlines which he thought could have been more supportive of Mrs. Thatcher – 'You're always getting at her' – and through the agency of his managing director, Long.

The latter bombarded him with memos containing reprimands such as 'the Chancellor of the Exchequer says the recession has ended. Why are you having the effrontery in *The Times* to say that it is not?'

Murdoch sought to exercise control indirectly at *The Times* by declining to fix an editorial budget. Consequently, Evans was compelled to seek permission for editorial decisions involving significant spending. As relationships soured due to the centrist political orientation of the paper, and its slow growth of circulation against a background of heavy losses, Murdoch actively fomented opposition among a group of journalists personally hostile to the editor. In an atmosphere thick with intrigue, in which Evans's personal aide was secretly reporting to the opposition group, Evans resigned in 1983 rather than 'be subjected to a thousand humiliations, challenged on every paperclip'. He was followed by a succession of editors, all of whom were right-wing in a Murdoch mould. However, the launch of the *Independent* in 1986 forced *The Times* to respond to new competition by being less predictably Conservative and, later, by slashing its price. The latest editor, Peter Stothard, has restored some of *The Times*'s tarnished authority, and greatly increased its circulation.

Another active interventionist, Victor (later Lord) Matthews, became head of the Express Group between 1977 and 1985. 'By and large editors will have complete freedom,' he promised, 'as long as they agree with the policy I have laid down.' During his first flush of enthusiasm as proprietor, he forced his editors to endure lengthy discourses of homespun political philosophy, which then had to be recreated as editorials. Only the most outrageous *ex cathedra* judgements seem to have been resisted. 'I had to plead against the *Evening Standard*', remembers Simon Jenkins, its former editor, 'being expected to call for a nuclear first strike on Moscow, to rid the world of communism, just like that.' Lord Matthews' staff were also a little taken aback by his novel sense of news values. 'I would find myself in a dilemma', he publicly declared, 'about whether to report a British Watergate affair because of the national harm. I believe in batting for Britain.'

But what perhaps most clearly reveals how little Matthews conformed to Koss's idealized view of the new generation of proprietors was Matthews' troubled relationship with his new

paper, the *Daily Star*, launched in 1978. Ironically it owed its existence to commercial considerations since it was conceived primarily as a way of making better use of under-employed printing plant and staff. Matthews was persuaded initially that it had to be relatively radical since it was aimed at a 'down-market', mostly Labour-voting audience. But when the *Daily Star's* editor, Peter Grimsditch, argued that the paper should actually support the Labour Party in the 1979 general election, Matthews vetoed this on explicitly political grounds. Even after the election, he responded to the paper more as a partisan reader than as a market-oriented publisher. For example, on reading the proofs of a *Daily Star* leader critical of the Thatcher government's first budget, he angrily phoned the editor, 'There aren't any poor. You can take my word for it. There are no poor in this country.' The leader was duly modified to accommodate this insight.

In the end, Grimsditch was sacked and the paper became another Tory tabloid. It vigorously supported the Conservative Party in the 1983 election, even though only 21 per cent of its readers voted for Mrs Thatcher. Even when Lord Matthews was ousted by Lord Stevens in a corporate take-over in 1985, the *Star* continued to be a right-wing paper that reflected the Conservative views of its new proprietor rather than the predominantly centre-left views of its readership. As Lord Stevens explained, 'I would not be happy to be associated with a left-wing paper. I suppose the papers echo my political views. . . . I do interfere and say enough is enough.' However, in 1996 a merger took place between the financial services and television conglomerate, MAI, led by a Labour supporter, Lord Hollick, and Lord Stevens's United News and Media Group. Both men are currently working together, and there has so far been no change in the Conservative politics of the United Newspaper Group.

The third dominant personality to emerge in the national press was Robert Maxwell, a former right-wing Labour MP who acquired the Mirror Group in 1984. He brought to an end the relatively autonomous regime that had existed when the group was owned by Reed International during the 1970s and early 1980s. In the early days of his proprietorship, he was in the office almost every night phoning, according to Alastair Hetherington, as often as six times in the evening to staff who were working on political reports. 'I certainly have a major say', he declared, 'in the political line of the paper [*Daily Mirror*].' Running newspapers, he added on another occasion, 'gives me the power to raise issues effectively. In simple terms, it's a megaphone.'

However, his control over the megaphone slackened when he became involved in ever more desperate attempts to save his heavily indebted media empire, including stealing from his employees' pension fund. Facing imminent ruin in 1991, he slipped overboard from his private yacht in what appears to have been a suicide. He was succeeded as head of the reconstituted Mirror Group by David Montgomery, an editor trained in the Murdoch stable. The Mirror Group is now owned primarily by financial institutions, and Montgomery is in effect a hired gun.

The other dominant publisher to emerge was the right-wing Canadian businessman, Conrad Black, who acquired the Telegraph Group in 1985. He adopted initially a hands-off strategy after appointing senior executives who were, as he put it, 'in general sympathy ideologically and philosophically' with his outlook. However, in 1989 he established a base in England, and expressed concern about the *Daily Telegraph's* 'flirtation with incorrect thinking about Ulster and about South Africa'. The editor, Max Hastings, who had been appointed as the publisher's new broom in 1986 and who had presided over a major purge of journalistic staff, found himself the butt of increasing pressure. Eventually, he made way for a more right-wing and politically engaged editor, Charles Moore.

The rise of personal proprietorship was paralleled by the rise of authoritarian editorship. Thus, Sir David English, editor of the *Daily Mail* (1971–92), was a domineering force who reshaped the paper. He also was unusual in that he acted relatively independently of his tax exile proprietor, the third Viscount Rothermere. Although Rothermere claimed to map 'the overall strategy my papers will take', he was probably less of a back-seat driver than he professed. More representative of the new style of assertive editor, albeit in an extreme form, was Kelvin MacKenzie, editor of the *Sun* (1981–94). MacKenzie had a licence to bully and intimidate within the newsroom providing he performed satisfactorily as his proprietor's *alter ego*, pushing up sales and giving vent to Murdoch's right-wing, anti-Establishment views. But when the *Sun's* circulation declined and its excesses became a political liability, MacKenzie was squeezed out.

The two notable exceptions to this general pattern of resurgent proprietors and assertive editors in the national press was the liberal regime at the *Guardian*, controlled by the Scott Trust, and the turbulent years of the *Observer*, under Lonrho's control (1981–93), followed by its sale to the Guardian Group. Lonrho's Tiny Rowland never fully succeeded in dominating the *Observer*, though, as we shall see, this was not from want of trying.

### **Concentration of press ownership**

The reassertion of hierarchical control coincided with the growth of press concentration. Between 1947 and 1989, the three leading press groups increased by over one-third their share of the newspaper market. By 1989, they controlled 57 per cent of *total* daily and Sunday circulation. Their dominance over the national press was even greater: by 1995 they accounted for three out of four national papers sold in Britain (see Table 1). This reduced the diversity of the press since papers in the same group tended to adopt similar editorial positions.



Table 1 *Concentration of ownership of daily and Sunday newspapers, 1947–95*

	<i>The three leading corporations' shares of:</i>		
	<i>Total daily and Sunday paper circulation</i>	<i>National daily circulation</i>	<i>National Sunday circulation</i>
	<i>%</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>%</i>
1947	42	62	60
1961	65	89	84
1976	53	72	86
1989	57	73	81
1995	N/A	74	84

*Sources:* derived from *Royal Commission on the Press 1947–9 Report* (1949), Appendices 3 and 5; *Royal Commission on the Press 1961–2 Report* (1962), Appendices 2, 3, and 4; *Royal Commission on the Press 1974–7 Final Report* (1977), Annex 3; *Annual Report of the Press Council 1989* (1990), Table 4 and Audit Bureau of Circulation (1989 and 1995).

*Note:* The three leading publishing corporations have been defined in terms of their market share of *each* of the categories of publication listed in this table. Total daily and Sunday paper circulation has been calculated by multiplying daily paper circulation six times to obtain a weekly circulation of daily and Sunday papers. This gives lower but more adequate figures than those calculated by the Press Council, which treat Sunday and daily circulation as equivalent and merely add the two together.

Growing oligopoly was fuelled by newspaper closures, and an increasing tendency for national daily and Sunday papers to operate under common ownership in order secure economies of consolidation. Although, for a time, it looked as if the arrival of a new interloper – Rupert Murdoch – would reverse the trend towards press concentration, this proved to be only a temporary interruption. The launch of new papers after 1985 with the help of new technology also failed, as we shall see, to weaken market domination. Indeed, the top three publishers' share of national daily circulation in 1995 was exactly the same as it had been in the days of hot metal ten years before.

In the regional press, the major chains made inroads in particular in the local weekly press. The five biggest publishers more than trebled their market share between 1947 and 1989 (see Table 2). In a growing number of subregions extensive monopolies were also created in which all or nearly all local newspapers, whether weekly or daily, were owned by the same group.

Although local freesheets mushroomed in the 1970s and 1980s, they also came to be organized into chains controlled by the leading regional publishers. Indeed, the freesheet revolution accelerated the growth of local press concentration. By 1995, the leading five publishers accounted for 43 per cent of *combined* freesheet and paid-for local weekly circulation. However, there was less overlap between ownership of national and local papers in 1995 than there had been ten years before.

Table 2 Concentration of ownership in the provincial press, 1947–89

	<i>The five leading chains' share of:</i>			
	<i>Regional evening newspaper circulation</i>	<i>Regional morning newspaper circulation</i>	<i>Local weekly circulation</i>	<i>Local weekly freesheet circulation</i>
	%	%	%	%
1947	44	65	8	–
1961	53	70	13	–
1976	58	69	25	NA
1989	54	73	27	38

*Sources:* derived from *Royal Commission on the Press 1947–9 Report* (1949), Appendices 4 and 5; *Royal Commission on the Press 1961–2 Report* (1962), Appendices 2, 3, and 4; *Royal Commission on the Press 1974–7 Final Report* (1977), Annex 3; and N. Hartley, P. Gudgeon, and R. Crafts, *Concentration of Ownership in the Provincial Press* (Royal Commission on the Press 1974–7, Research Series 5); *Annual Report of the Press Council 1989* (1990), Tables 4 and 5 and D1 and D2.

*Note:* The five leading chains are not all the same in each category of publication.

The development of press concentration was part of a more general trend towards increasingly centralized control over the leisure industries. The top five companies in each media sector controlled in the mid-1980s an estimated 40 per cent of book sales, 45 per cent of ITV transmissions, between half and two-thirds of video rentals and music product sales, and over three-quarters of daily and Sunday paper sales. Some of these companies were linked to each other through cross-ownership.<sup>4</sup>

For example, Pearson controlled not only one of the leading regional press groups, Westminster Press, but also the major book publisher, Penguin. Like many other press conglomerates, it diversified during the late 1980s and early 1990s into the new television and information industries, acquiring holdings in Channel 5, BSkyB, UK Gold, UK Living, the satellite operator, SES, and the software company, Mindscape. However, it sold its local press group and share of BSkyB in 1995–6, as part of a process of refocusing its business.

The relaxation of cross-ownership rules, the market opportunities created by technological innovation and the synergies that, it was hoped, could be secured through the multi-media packaging of products all encouraged a rapid growth of media combines. Some, like the Daily Mail Group, are centred primarily in Britain, while others are truly global (see Table 3). Thus, the four British newspapers controlled by Murdoch are part of his chain of papers extending on a north–south axis from London to Adelaide, and on an east–west axis from Budapest to Fiji. These are, in turn, the subsidiary of a much bigger media empire including a major publishing house (HarperCollins), a major film company (Twentieth Century Fox), and, above all, a global television empire consisting of Fox TV in the US, BSkyB in Europe, Star TV in Asia and extensive cable television interests in South America, all controlled ultimately by a holding company based in Australia. Rupert Murdoch has become, in Bagdikian's phrase, a 'lord of the global village'.

Table 3 *The conglomeration of the British press<sup>1</sup>*

	<i>Main British press interests</i>	<i>Selected other media interests</i>	<i>Selected non-media interests</i>
News Corporation (Murdoch)	<i>Sun</i> <i>News of the World</i> <i>The Times</i> <i>Sunday Times</i> (Total newspaper circulation 10.6 million)	BSkyB Fox Broadcasting (US) Asia Star TV Twentieth Century Fox <i>New York Post</i> HarperCollins	Ansett Transport (Australia) Salcombe Securities (Australia) Scott Acquisitions (USA) ANM Investments (Australia)
Mirror Group <sup>2</sup> (Montgomery)	<i>Daily Mirror</i> <i>Sunday Mirror</i> <i>People</i> <i>Daily Record</i> <i>Sunday Mail</i> <i>Independent</i> <i>Independent on Sunday</i> (Total newspaper circulation 9.2 million)	Live TV Mirror Television Saltire Press	None (Demerged after collapse of Pergamon Group)
MAI/United News and Media <sup>2</sup> (Hollick/Stevens)	<i>Daily Express</i> <i>Sunday Express</i> <i>Daily Star</i> United Provincial Newspapers United Magazines (Total newspaper circulation 5.2 million)	Meridian TV Anglia TV Channel 5 For Rent (USA) Asian Business Press (Singapore) Miller Freeman (Japan) UPN (Spain)	Harlow Butler Garban NOP MRI Blackfriars Leasing UN Investments

Daily Mail/ Associated Newspapers (Rothermere)	<i>Daily Mail</i> <i>Mail on Sunday</i> Northcliffe Newspapers (Total newspaper circulation 5 million)	Westcountry Television Chiltern Radio Kissafold (Hungary) Associated News (USA)	Bouverie Investments (Canada) Transport Group Holdings Associated Properties (USA) Exas
Hollinger (Black)	<i>Daily Telegraph</i> <i>Sunday Telegraph</i> (Total newspaper circulation 1.7 million)	Sterling Newspapers (Can) Fairfax Group (Australia) Valley Cable (USA) <i>Jerusalem Post</i> (Israel)	Norcen Energy (Canada) Cordon Investments (Canada) Holcay Holdings (Cayman Is.)
Guardian Media Group (Scott Trust)	<i>Guardian</i> <i>Observer</i> <i>Manchester Evening News</i> (Total newspaper circulation 0.9 million)	Broadcast Communications EMAP Radio Fourth Estate Books GMTV	None
Pearson plc (Cowdray)	<i>Financial Times</i> <i>Economist</i>	Thames TV Satellite TV (with BBC) UK Gold Mindscape Grundy Worldwide (Aus) Addison-Wesley (US)	Lazard's Bank Reed Tool (USA) Mme Tussauds Alton Towers
Reed-Elsevier <sup>2</sup>	Reed Regional Newspapers Reed Business Publishing IPC Magazines	Butterworth Hamlyn Reed-Elsevier Nederland Reed-Elsevier France	Reed Elsevier Properties Reflex Insurance Uteff International

Sources: *Who Owns Whom 1995/6*; Company Reports; ABC.

Notes: <sup>1</sup>All circulation figures exclude freesheets, magazines and non-UK publications. <sup>2</sup>No dominant shareholder.

### **Conglomerates, profits, and politics**

The other key change in the post-war press was its integration into the core sectors of financial and industrial capital (see Table 3). Between 1969 and 1986 nine multinational conglomerates bought over 200 newspapers and magazines with a total circulation of 46 million at the time of purchase (excluding publications resold to each other). Some of these (Atlantic Richfield, Lonrho, Trafalgar House, Reed, Hollinger) were primarily engaged in activities outside publishing and their involvement in Fleet Street was sometimes shortlived. Others (the conglomerates controlled by Murdoch, the Cowdrays, Stevens, and the late Robert Maxwell) were originally printing or publishing companies which expanded into other areas like banking and transport. The 1990s saw a move towards demerging in which some media conglomerates divested themselves of extraneous, non-core businesses. Even so, every national newspaper<sup>5</sup> in Britain, in 1996, still had a commercial involvement in activities outside newspaper publishing.

This integration of the press into other business enterprises gave rise to conflicts of interest. It resulted in no-go areas where newspapers were reluctant to investigate for fear of stepping on corporate toes. As *The Times*, then owned by the conglomerate Thomson Organization, candidly told the last Royal Commission on the Press, 'coverage of Thomson organization activities in Thomson newspapers tends, certainly, to be drily factual'. Corporate entanglements could also increase newspapers' vulnerability to pressure. Thus, Rupert Murdoch was threatened by the Malaysian government in 1994 with reprisals against his business empire, at a critical moment in the development of his Asian satellite TV business, following prominent reports in the *Sunday Times* that senior officials and ministers had received backhanders in the building of the Pergau dam, funded with British aid. Murdoch first remonstrated with the *Sunday Times* editor, Andrew Neil: 'You're boring people. You are doing too much on Malaysia. . . . They're all corrupt in that part of the world.' He then transferred Neil to a job in his US TV business, reportedly assuring Malaysia's Prime Minister Mahathir that a 'rogue editor' had been 'sorted out'.

Newspapers were also deployed as auxiliaries in the pursuit of wider corporate objectives. Thus, the *Observer* came under pressure from its parent company, Lonrho, to attack the way in which the Al Fayed brothers had worsted Lonrho in a take-over battle for the House of Fraser group. 'In summary', read one internal note, 'Mr Rowland [Lonrho's chief executive] would greatly appreciate any assistance in persuading Mrs Thatcher to publish the report of the inspectors into House of Fraser' that was strongly critical of the Al Fayed. Between 1985 and 1989, the paper responded by publishing a series of articles criticizing the Fraser take-over, and calling for it to be quashed. This culminated in the publication of an unprecedented mid-week issue, dedicated to attacking the 'Phoney Pharaoh' Mohamed Al Fayed, to coincide with Lonrho's AGM. *Observer* journalists

appealed to their independent directors who, after a formal enquiry, concluded that the paper's reputation had been 'tarnished'.

This was not the only issue which caused the *Observer's* reputation to be sullied during the 1980s. David Leigh, head of its investigative team, refused to return in 1989 to a story about British Aerospace malpractice in selling Tornado aircraft, on the grounds that it had been planted by Lonrho executives and was being inflated for reasons of corporate rivalry. He eventually resigned over the issue, declaring that the *Observer* 'had become a sick paper'. His verdict was echoed by the paper's former deputy editor, Anthony Howard, who declared that 'without any overt pressure being applied, there has developed a tendency to anticipate Mr Rowland's wishes and to cater for his interests.'

Editorial compromises at the *Observer* came under the public spotlight partly because its journalists made a fuss. Compromises sometimes occurred in other press groups without the same degree of internal opposition. When Murdoch newspapers gave disproportionate and largely uncritical coverage to the British launch of its sister company, Sky Television, in 1989, only journalists on one of his newspapers – *The Times* – made a formal protest. *The Times'* independent directors declined, much to their discredit, to investigate the protest beyond speaking to the editor.

However, these occasional abuses were less significant than the general drift of the press towards the orbit of big business. The conglomerate development of the press gave rise to a proliferation of interlocking directorships and resulted in many senior newspaper executives working on the same boards as leaders of other business enterprises. These work ties were reinforced by other links. Graham Murdock's pioneering research showed that in 1976–7 two-thirds of the chairmen and vice-chairmen of the ten largest press groups were educated at public school and/or Oxbridge, from where many of Britain's financial and industrial élite were also recruited. The majority of newspaper controllers belonged to clubs (their favourites being the Royal Yacht Club and White's), frequented by senior financial and industrial executives. In the late 1970s, press controllers were also locked into a running battle with increasingly militant trade unions, as were those who ran other industries with poor labour relations. All these points of contact – similar social origins, shared educational experiences, overlapping social networks, close working relationships and conflicts with organized labour – encouraged the development of a shared outlook between press controllers and other leaders of corporate enterprise.

These developments subtly changed the relationship of the press to the party system. Although right-wing press barons had broken the mould in the inter-war period by tilting against the Conservative Party, they were in a sense part of the established political order. They still perceived the world through the prism of Westminster, and were caught up in the day-to-day battles of party politics. This tradition lived on in the post-war period in the

indomitable figure of Lord Beaverbrook, and in Cecil King and Lord Hartwell of the Telegraph Group, both throwbacks to an earlier era. But the new generation of press magnates after 1970 tended to be either controllers of large global empires like Murdoch, Black, and the late Robert Maxwell, or the head of major corporate enterprises like Lord Stevens. In the former case, their horizons were global rather than national (or imperial); they could only give intermittent bursts of attention to their British newspapers; and their media power was flexed to exert influence on politicians, not in one country but in several. They had an allegiance to right-wing politics rather than to the British Conservative Party (or, in Maxwell's case to the Labour Party), and adopted a more independent approach in which their support had to be won partly on the basis of what would favour their business interests. Compared with them, controllers of British-centred press conglomerates tended to have stronger ties to the Conservative Party. But unlike the first generation of press barons, these home-grown magnates did not nurse ambitions to be at the centre of British politics.

This more distanced relationship to party politics did not preclude periods of intense partisanship. The Conservative press was probably more pro-government during the mid-Thatcher period (the mid-1980s) than at any other time during the post-war period. But this partisanship was inspired by a new right programme of anti-union legislation, privatisation and low taxation initiated by an electorally successful leader. It was conditional and could be reversed, as John Major discovered when he came under sustained attack in 1994 from all Conservative newspapers save those in the Express group. What had developed in place of old party loyalties and intense political involvement was a more calculating and detached relationship to politicians. This was illustrated when Murdoch made an implicit deal with Tony Blair in 1995. The *Sun*'s qualified support for New Labour in the 1997 general election was traded in return for a non-retaliatory policy when Labour was elected.

Indeed for some proprietors, newspaper ownership was little more than an investment in corporate public relations. It extended their range of business and political connections, increased their corporation's prestige, and, through judicious editorial appointments, contributed to the maintenance of public opinion favourable to private enterprise. As the Chairman of Atlantic Richfield (which spent approximately \$20 million subsidizing the *Observer* before selling it to Lonrho) explained to his shareholders in 1978:

Despite the social upheaval of the last few years, Atlantic Richfield's primary task remains what it has always been – to conduct its business within accepted rules to generate profits, thereby protecting and enhancing the investment of its owners. But . . . senior management recognise that the Company cannot expect to operate freely or advantageously without public approval.

The ownership of newspapers thus became one strategy by which large business organizations sought to influence the environment in which they operated. Indeed a number of major press groups – Trafalgar House (which controlled for a time the Express group), United Newspapers, and Pearson – gave in the 1970s and 1980s substantial donations to the Conservative Party. Owning (and in some cases subsidizing) newspapers was merely another way of sustaining a political party providing it served their economic interests. It was also a way of buying political influence, and securing the relaxation of regulatory obstacles to business expansion.

Part of the lure of the national press for some proprietors was also its social prestige. The ownership of national newspapers led to the bestowal of titles on an almost automatic basis and provided access to a glittering social world. It was a way of mainlining into the romance of Fleet Street which is, as Leonard Woolf once observed, ‘a magnetic field of highly charged importance, influence . . . and vocational delusions’. These were clearly important attractions for Lord Thomson, who spent some £8 million subsidizing *The Times* (though part of this was tax deductible).

What is clear is that the rewards of newspaper ownership were not defined solely in terms of profits. A growing number of national newspapers made substantial losses during the period between the ending of newsprint rationing in 1956 and the introduction of cost-cutting technology in the mid 1980s. Thus in 1966 five out of eight national newspapers made losses totalling £4.3 million. By 1975 four national dailies and six out of seven national Sunday papers made an even larger loss. In 1982 the national press was reported to have made a net loss of £29 million. Thus when conglomerates bought up the rotten boroughs of the national press, they were seeking more than just an immediate return on their investment.

Yet, right-wing newspapers did not become in a simple sense mouthpieces of big business. The desire of some press controllers to promote particular perspectives was qualified by the need to entertain and beguile readers with very different viewpoints and social experiences. The commitments of press controllers were also offset to some extent by the professional concerns of journalists, and by the external environment of conflicting news sources and divergent cultural trends. But what changed from the early 1970s onwards – and what contributed to the marked rightward shift of the press – was that newspapers became more subject to assertive managerial pressures and the corporate culture of large-scale business than they had been during the 1950s and 1960s.

### **Compliance and resistance**

The reassertion of managerial control did not go unchallenged. Strongest resistance occurred in the broadsheet press where journalists had become accustomed to a greater degree of autonomy than their tabloid counterparts, and where the new regimes represented a greater



rupture with the past. Yet, there was only one occasion when journalists actually succeeded in decisively defeating their proprietor.

When Tiny Rowland acquired the *Observer* in 1981, he intended to make substantial changes. The paper's liberal coverage of Africa, he warned, was abetting the advance of Communism. In traditional proprietorial style, he appointed a new roving Africa correspondent without consulting the editor.

However, he had been forced, like Murdoch, to accept new Articles of Association and independent directors at the *Observer*, designed to prevent him from exercising editorial control. The independent directors at the *Observer*, unlike those at Times Newspapers, had been chosen in effect by staff which made them more of an obstacle. And whereas Murdoch moved with consummate skill at Times Newspapers, first appointing caretaker editors and encircling them with people he could trust, Rowland blundered in with an ill-judged ultimatum that undermined his authority.

Donald Treford, the *Observer's* editor, wrote an article in April 1984 reporting that Zimbabwe's armed forces were torturing and killing their own citizens in the dissident Matabeleland province. This put Rowland in a difficult position since his corporation, Lonrho, derived £15 million of its profit from investments in Zimbabwe. Rowland also had an uneasy relationship with the Zimbabwe Prime Minister, Robert Mugabe, since he had backed his principal rival, Joshua Nkomo, in a recent election. Seeking to protect his commercial interests, Rowland told Treford to withdraw the article.

Treford refused and was backed in his stand by all his editorial staff and independent directors. In the highly publicized row that followed (in which Lonrho reportedly cancelled advertising in its own paper), Rowland had little real choice but to back off. Lonrho's corporate image, already tarnished by Edward Heath's celebrated attack on 'the unacceptable face of capitalism', would have been seriously undermined if Rowland had agreed to Treford's offer of resignation. In the event, Treford survived as editor until 1993. However, his victory was only a limited one since he had subsequently to tread a difficult tightrope, balancing the demands of his proprietor with those of his suspicious and increasingly critical staff.

The partial success of journalists' resistance on the *Observer* was in marked contrast to what happened on the *Sunday Times*. This is worth reporting briefly because it draws attention to something that the academic literature tends to ignore: the pressures and sanctions that a determined new management can bring to bear in order to change the culture and ethos of a news organization.

The *Sunday Times* evolved into a neo-Thatcherite paper in the early 1980s partly in response to the increasing influence of new right ideas in the early phase of the Thatcherite era. But the principal cause of change was a management-imposed shift of editorial direction. Murdoch's appointment of Andrew Neil as editor in 1983 was part of a general shake-up in the editorial hierarchy of the *Sunday Times* in which section editors from the pre-Murdoch

regime were gradually weeded out. This removed the buffer that had partly insulated reporters and feature writers from the full impact of the change in the paper's ownership. Neil's regime inaugurated, according to Claire Tomalin, the paper's former literary editor, 'a reign of terror'. 'I was extremely aware of a great deal of misery and bullying', she recalls. Her recollection of this period is echoed by other journalists we interviewed. For example, Peter Wilby, the paper's former education correspondent, recalls: There was a tone of fear . . . a horrible, "totalitarian" atmosphere.<sup>6</sup>

Certain sorts of story – what Neil called 'wet' or 'lefty' stories – were discouraged or downplayed. Thus, Donald Macintyre, the paper's labour correspondent, had a running battle over his reporting of the miners' strike (1984–5) in which he was regularly pressed by the editor to adopt a less critical attitude towards the National Coal Board and the government. Sometimes Macintyre felt that the editor's criticism was justified; sometimes he argued back; but at other times, he admitted, he censored himself 'to some extent'. The trouble with arguing back, Macintyre explained, is that it 'starts to become counter-productive and you get to the point where you either had to leave or you just become a sort of joke'. Macintyre chose to leave.

At times the pressure on journalists from the old regime was extremely abrasive. On one occasion, John Shirley, the paper's chief reporter (and rightwing Labour supporter) was denounced by Neil as a 'left-winger' and 'Trotskyist' in a voice so loud that the newsroom fell into a hushed silence. Shirley became so enraged by changes on the paper that he cancelled its delivery to his home. 'A lot of people were being bullied', according to the *Sunday Times*'s former features editor, Don Berry. 'Life was deliberately made unpleasant for them in the hope that they would go.' Thus Joan Smith, who had complained about the way in which her report of the Greenham Common anti-nuclear protest had been altered, was told by the news editor, Anthony Bambridge, on 25 January 1984: 'The editor feels you have got in a rut on nuclear matters. He would like to see you broaden your range. He would like to see you in the paper more often.' Smith asked how often and was told every week, ideally. She then pointed out that she had had 46 stories published in the past 44 weeks. Bambridge replied, 'You are to be congratulated. I am having a terrible time. You are not the only one who is thinking of leaving.' Two months later, Smith left the *Sunday Times*.

But the principal way in which the paper was propelled editorially to the right was through a cumulative process of attrition. This is graphically described by Isabel Hilton, the Latin American specialist at the *Sunday Times* until July 1986:

What would happen is that you would write a story and it would disappear. The copy would vanish around the building and people would write little things into it and take out other things. It would eventually appear in a very truncated form with the emphases changed. It

had all been done at stages along the way. To try and make a fuss about this on a Saturday when everything was very busy was very difficult.

The accumulation of pressures led some journalists to internalize controls. 'The sense of intimidation', according to Hilton,

was so strong that people actually started censoring themselves because it is very unpleasant to get into this kind of argument all the time. It is not just a collection of incidents, it's a collection of incidents *and* the atmosphere, which in the end is so depressing. You stop functioning as a journalist. There are things you just don't bother to pursue because you know you just won't get them into the paper.

Hilton eventually left. Her example was followed by many others, although not all went for the same reasons. In early 1981, there were some 170 journalists on the *Sunday Times*. At least a hundred journalists left the paper between February 1981 and March 1986. This exodus included most of the best-known *Sunday Times* journalists from the pre-Murdoch era.

The changes in the *Sunday Times* during the period 1981–6 symbolized the shift towards a more hierarchical pattern of control in the national press. But the level of conflict at the *Sunday Times* and also *The Times* in the early 1980s was atypical. A number of factors generally minimized conflict. Proprietors usually had a free hand to choose the editors they wanted, and usually appointed them on the basis of short-term contracts. Editors' freedom of action was generally curtailed by the house tradition of the paper, budgetary controls, management guidelines, and an implicit framework of understanding about how the paper should develop. Increasingly editors in the changed managerial environment of the 1980s came to accept proprietorial intervention as legitimate. As Max Hastings, then editor of the *Daily Telegraph*, put it: 'I've never really believed in the notion of editorial independence as such. I would never imagine saying to Conrad [his proprietor], "you have no right to ask me to do this, I must observe my independence."'

A variety of influences also limited conflict in the newsroom. Journalists mostly internalized the norms and news values of their paper (though tensions sometimes increased if these were modified). Conforming to hierarchical requirements brought rewards in terms of good assignments, high exposure, promotion, and peer group esteem. Failure to conform invited escalating sanctions. As Anthony Bevins, a former political correspondent of the *Sun* and *Daily Mail* and now political editor of the *Independent*, puts it (with a measure of overstatement):

It is daft to suggest that individuals can buck the system, ignore the pre-set 'taste' of their newspapers, use their own news-sense in reporting the truth of any event, and survive. Dissident reporters who do not deliver the goods suffer professional death. They are ridden by news desks and backbench executives, they have their stories spiked on a systematic basis, they face the worst form of newspaper punishment – by-line deprivation. . . . It is much easier to pander to what the editors want.

Accommodation was facilitated by other factors. While newspapers were exposed to contradictory influences, these were not evenly balanced. Newsgathering continued to be based on routines organized around powerful groups and institutions adept at meeting the press's needs – most notably various branches of the state which were under the political authority of Conservative administrations throughout the 1980s and early 1990s. Prevailing news values accorded particular weight to these accredited sources, thereby legitimizing heavy reliance on them. Single party rule was accompanied by a shift to the right in the political climate of opinion (though not to the extent that the Conservatives' political hegemony based on the first-past-the-post electoral system suggested). The structures of newsgathering, professional norms and a shift in the political culture all tended to reinforce the predominantly centre-right orientation of the national press. Most journalists were able to accommodate to this. While there is no recent data about their political attitudes, Tunstall's pioneering survey of specialist correspondents in 1968 affords an indication of their outlook. He found that only 2 per cent of those working for right-wing Labour or centrist papers said that they were 'well to the left' of their publications.

Indeed, changes in the structure of journalism as an occupation during the last fifteen years seem to have exerted a 'moderating' influence. The national press came to make increased use of freelancers, stringers, and those on temporary contracts who often found themselves competing against a growing reserve army of underemployed or aspirant journalists. At the same time, national newspapers offered well-rewarded berths for 'staff' journalists. This combination of economic privilege and a widening abyss of economic insecurity nurtured a more compliant workforce.

### **Restoration of market controls**

While the market constrained proprietors, it did not automatically override their political commitments. It did not function in the idealised way imagined by neo-liberals because it was subject to distortion. This caused consumer power to be curtailed, and contributed to a growing divergence between editorial and public opinion in a form that greatly over-represented the right.

A key change in the functioning of the market occurred in the late 1940s and early 1950s when newsprint rationing was greatly reduced, culminating in its abolition in 1956. This restored the press's heavy dependence on advertising. It also led to a more unequal distribution of advertising since advertisers were no longer restricted in their choice by lack of space.

This unequal distribution was not primarily the result of political prejudice, which featured only occasionally as a determining factor in advertising decisions. A small number of advertising agencies admitted to the second Royal Commission on the Press (1962) that their clients sometimes vetoed left-wing publications. The ill-fated *Scottish Daily News*, founded as a radical co-operative in 1975, was told by an irate advertiser: 'I'm not going to keep a newspaper which, the first time I get a strike, will back the strikers.' A prelaunch feasibility study for another failed left newspaper, the *News on Sunday*, also concluded on the basis of interviews with agency executives that its politics would deter some advertisers.

However, political considerations played an even smaller part in advertising selection in the post-1945 period than they had before. Precise calculations of the cost of opportunities to see advertisements in rival publications, analysed in terms of the social characteristics and, later, buying behaviour of readers, became the main basis for drawing up press advertising schedules. Intuitive assessments of editorial influence, in which ideological judgements sometimes crept in, became less significant. This was reflected, for example, in the first two handbooks on advertising media planning published under the auspices of the Institute of Practitioners in Advertising. The first, issued in 1955, contained a whole chapter on the 'character and atmosphere' of advertising media containing speculation about 'the intangible effects of accompanying editorial and advertising'. Its successor, published in 1971, was openly disparaging about this approach.<sup>7</sup>

But even if the increasing inequality of advertising allocations was not politically motivated, it had political consequences. During the 1950s, advertising income was redistributed in favour of upscale and midscale publications. This operated against the left press because, generally speaking, its readers were less affluent than those of the right-wing press. Certain contingent factors exaggerated this distortion. The rapid growth of employment and financial advertising benefited primarily upscale papers, while downscale papers suffered more than others from the rise of television as an advertising medium because their readers tended to be heavy viewers of commercial television. Income inequalities also began to increase in the 1980s and 1990s, after a thirty-year period of little change.

### **The death of radical papers**

The redistribution of advertising in the 1950s coincided with a fall in national circulations. These reached a peak in 1951, dropped and then rallied, only to fall sharply after 1957. This

induced, in turn, a rapid escalation of expenditure as newspapers desperately tried to escape the general circulation decline by spending more on larger papers no longer subject to strict newsprint controls. Detailed evidence shows that there was a marked deterioration in the financial position of the national press between 1957 and 1965 because its costs rose much faster than income.

Popular social democratic papers thus found themselves in a double bind. They were exposed like the rest of the press to the general deterioration in the cost and revenue structure of the industry. They tended also to be particularly badly hit by the redistribution of advertising, following deregulation. This was especially true of the *Daily Herald* which had three drawbacks in advertising terms: its readership was disproportionately working-class, male and ageing. In the advertising space famine of 1945, its advertising per copy sold had been more than that of either the *Daily Express* or *Daily Mail*. By 1964 it was less than half of either paper.

The *Daily Herald* also lost readers partly as a consequence of its continuing commitment to the Labour Party during the Conservative ascendancy of the 1950s. But its loss of advertising far exceeded its loss of sales, and was a more important cause of its downfall. In 1955 the *Daily Herald* had an 11 per cent share of both national daily circulation and advertising revenue. By 1964 its share of circulation had declined modestly to 8 per cent but its share of advertising had slumped to 3.5 per cent.

Indeed despite its loss of sales, the *Daily Herald* still retained a substantial following. It was not true, as Sir Dennis Hamilton suggested, that the *Daily Herald* 'was beset by the problem which has dogged nearly every newspaper vowed to a political idea: not enough people wanted to read it.' When it closed in 1964, it had a circulation of 1,265,000. This was more than five times the circulation of *The Times* of which Sir Dennis Hamilton was then editor-in-chief.

The *News Chronicle*, a long-established Liberal daily, succumbed in 1960 with a substantial circulation of 1,162,000. This was roughly on a par with the highly profitable *Daily Telegraph* buoyed up by up-market advertising. Similarly the *Sunday Citizen* (formerly *Reynolds News*) folded in 1967. It was a quality paper in terms of the relatively extensive coverage it gave to public affairs. But by 1965 it obtained per copy sold one-tenth of the advertising revenue of the *Sunday Times* because it did not appeal to an élite audience.

The closure of these three social democratic papers was part of an epidemic that also killed off the *Empire News*, *Sunday Dispatch*, *Sunday Graphic*, and *Daily Sketch* between 1960 and 1972. All these papers succumbed to similar pressures to those that decimated the centre-left press. They all had a predominantly working-class readership and, in terms of mass marketing, relatively 'small' circulations. They thus fell between two stools: they had neither the quantity nor the social 'quality' of readership needed to attract sufficient advertising for them to survive in a deregulated economy.

### Adjusting to the advertising system

One response of downscale papers to the economic realities of post-war publishing was to try to break out of the working-class market. The editorial implications of this are graphically illustrated by the troubled post-war history of the *Daily Herald*.

The *Daily Herald's* management responded initially to the paper's growing shortfall in advertising not by modifying its editorial policy but by seeking new and more imaginative ways of selling the paper to the advertising industry. In particular, it sought to combat the negative image of the paper's readers as poor by initiating research which showed that they were heavy spenders on certain products such as canned meat, desserts, cereals, and beer.

The diminishing success of this promotion encouraged the *Daily Herald's* management to undertake in 1955 a fundamental review of the paper's editorial strategy and market position. Two clear options emerged from this review. One, partly inspired by market research into what people read in popular papers, was to devote less space to political and industrial coverage and more to human interest stories, photographs, and strip cartoons. This was identified as the most promising way to rebuild a mass circulation and, in particular, to 'bring in women – vital to the advertising department'.<sup>8</sup>

The second option, and the one that was eventually adopted, was to attract more advertising by seeking to upgrade the paper's readership. This strategy led to the appointment of John Beavan as editor in 1960 with the remit to lure former *News Chronicle* readers and, above all, to attract 'the intelligent grammar school boy'. The paper moved up-market, and included features about books, classical music, opera, and even ballet. It also loosened its ties with the Labour Party and the TUC, and moved politically to the right.

Yet despite these changes, the *Daily Herald's* readership remained obstinately proletarian. Indeed even by 1963–4, only 13 per cent of its readers were middle-class. Yet its owners were conscious that the traditional, loyalist union sub-culture from which the *Daily Herald* sprang was in decline. The paper's management, influenced by the Gaitskellite revisionism of the early 1960s, concluded that the cloth-cap, traditional Labour Party identity of the paper was putting off potential readers and that the only way to blast the paper successfully into the middle market was to relaunch it under a new name, the *Sun*. As a prelude to this, the TUC was persuaded to sell its share of the paper in 1964 to the International Publishing Corporation (IPC) which had acquired Odhams' shares in the paper three years earlier.

The intention behind the new launch was to construct a new coalition of readers composed of working-class, 'political radicals' (the old *Herald* readership) and young, upwardly mobile 'social radicals'. 'The new paper', according to an internal memorandum, 'is to have the more representative make-up essential to advertisers.'<sup>9</sup> But the difficulties inherent in this strategy were dauntingly revealed in pre-launch research which showed the enormous gulf that

separated the two wings of the coalition. ‘Social radicals’, defined largely in terms of their attitudes towards race, hanging, and issues like increasing access to (but not abolishing) public schools, turned out to be only marginally more inclined to vote Labour than Conservative or Liberal, and to be not greatly more likely to read the *Daily Herald* than the *Daily Telegraph*. Ranking high amongst the favourite reading of ‘social radicals’ were the society gossip columns of the *Daily Express* and *Daily Mail* expressing social values fundamentally at odds with the class-conscious, often resentful attitudes of many *Herald* readers recorded by Odhams’ previous surveys.

These findings suggest that it would have been more sensible for the *Daily Herald* to have been relaunched as a more popular, working-class daily. But this strategy was rejected by IPC because it would have meant spending money attacking another paper in the same group, the *Daily Mirror*. Instead the launch proceeded along its preconceived lines, seemingly unaffected by the corporation’s own research.

In the event, the editorial staff of the *Sun* never succeeded in finding an editorial formula which reconciled the two very dissimilar groups that they were seeking to attract. IPC’s market research showed that the paper failed both to please old *Herald* readers and to attract young, affluent social radicals.<sup>10</sup> The paper struggled on as an underfinanced, deradicalized hybrid until it was sold at a low price to Murdoch in 1969.

The *Sun* was then reoriented towards a mass working-class market. The recasting was done with consummate skill, making the *Sun* Britain’s best-selling daily. It greatly increased its entertainment coverage, in particular human interest reporting of show business and TV stars, developed a more explicit style of soft porn, and shrank its coverage of public affairs. It evolved a complex editorial formula – mistakenly dismissed by some critics as simple-minded – which was both hedonistic and moralistic, iconoclastic and authoritarian, generally Conservative in its opinions and radical in its rhetoric. It also anticipated the Thatcherite era, articulating new right arguments even before Mrs Thatcher.

It was an ironic ending for a daily that had been the only consistent supporter of the Labour Party for over half a century. Revealed by market research to have had the most devoted readership of any popular daily as late as 1958,<sup>11</sup> it was first enfeebled and then converted into a paper which stood for everything which the old *Daily Herald* had opposed.

### **Consensual pull of the mass market**

Other reformist papers adjusted to post-war market conditions by muting their radical commitment in a bid to maximize sales. This pattern of accommodation is illustrated by the post-war history of the *Daily Mirror*: It emerged triumphant from the radical wartime and immediate post-war period to become in 1949 the top circulation daily paper. But the 1951



general election inaugurated a long period of Conservative ascendancy. Other indicators registered a change in the market environment. The *Daily Mirror's* growth of circulation slowed down in the early 1950s, and began to fall after 1955. The paper also failed to maintain the substantial share of advertising it had won in the 1940s. Its management became increasingly aware that the tide of radicalism which had helped to sweep the paper to the top was receding, and began to worry about whether the paper was moving out of step with the times. It responded by steering the *Daily Mirror* more towards the centre of gravity in the mass market – the political centre. The class divisiveness of the paper's 'us and them' rhetoric of the 1940s softened in the 1950s and early 1960s into the more inclusive and acceptable rhetoric of 'the young at heart' against 'the old', the modern against the traditional, 'new ideas' instead of 'tired men'. The *Daily Mirror's* commitment to the Labour Party remained but it changed in character. Increasingly it took the form of opposition to the Conservative Party rather than positive advocacy of a socialist alternative.

In the late 1950s, the paper also pursued, for a mixture of motives, young and upwardly mobile readers. They brought in additional advertising because they were particularly sought after by advertisers; they seemed to embody important, new social trends; and they were an accessible part of the market because their newspaper reading habits were relatively unfixed. The effect of this redirection was to make the paper's readership more socially and politically heterogeneous. By 1964 one-third of the paper's readership opposed the Labour Party and its readership profile was considerably more up-market than it had been in the 1940s. This was perceived by the *Mirror's* management to impose a limitation on the paper's radicalism. As Cecil King, then Chairman of the Mirror Group, explained in 1967,

Today newspaper circulations are vast assemblies of people of all social classes and all varieties of political view. A controller who tried to campaign for causes profoundly distasteful, even to large minorities of his readers, would . . . put his business at risk.

However, Cecil King's market fears, and those of his senior colleagues, perhaps rationalized their own personal inclinations. King's youthful radicalism had waned as he got older. Hugh Cudlipp, his close colleague and successor as chairman of the Mirror Group, subsequently left the Labour Party to join the SDP. Their centrism was reflected in the choice of political advisers to the Mirror Group in the 1950s and 1960s – Alfred Robens, George Brown, and Richard Marsh, all right-wing Labour politicians who subsequently defected to the Conservatives or Liberal-SDP Alliance (later Liberal Democrats).

The *Daily Mirror* succeeded in recouping the circulation it had lost in the late 1950s until it was challenged by the renascent *Sun*. Between 1969 and 1985, its sales fell into almost continuous decline and this free fall was resumed again in the early 1990s. The paper's

successive managements responded defensively by cutting back on the *Daily Mirror*'s campaigning issue journalism. The paper also experimented with different populist registers in an attempt to find a new voice that would appeal to a younger readership. Both the *Daily Mirror*'s inner uncertainty and waning radical commitment were symbolized by its changes of masthead. Under the Maxwell regime, its old campaigning masthead slogan 'Forward with the People' was resuscitated in a consensual form as 'Forward with Britain'. This was replaced in turn with a slogan defining the paper's identity exclusively in market terms: 'Colour Newspaper of the Year'.

By the mid-1990s, the *Daily Mirror* had in some ways more in common with its rival, the *Sun*, than with its former incarnation as one of Britain's greatest radical papers. However, its loss of confidence was only one aspect of its post-war evolution. A no less significant feature of the *Daily Mirror*'s development was the declining attention it gave to public affairs, and the greatly increased proportion of space which it devoted to sport, pictures, and entertainment features. This shift was part of a more general transformation of the popular press.

### **Depoliticization of the popular press**

The commercial pressures reshaping the *Daily Herald* and the *Daily Mirror* affected popular papers more generally. These emerged from their cocooned existence in the 1940s and early 1950s into an intensely competitive environment where the mounting pile of dead titles was a constant reminder to publishers of the consequences of failing to adjust to change. The decline of circulation that began in the 1950s continued in a seemingly remorseless way, with a temporary recovery of popular newspaper sales only in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Underlying this slide were three key trends: a reduction in the number of households buying more than one paper in response to newspapers' increased size and cost, a slow decline in the proportion of adults reading national papers after 1967, and the modest growth of quality papers at the expense of the popular press. Editors of popular papers became acutely aware that they were swimming against the market tide.

Although advertising expenditure on the national press steadily increased, popular nationals' share of advertising declined gradually after 1953. More important, their advertising profit margins were seriously eroded during the 1960s and 1970s because most popular papers failed to increase their advertising rates in line with rising costs in an attempt to fend off competition from ITV. Popular newspapers responded to their mounting economic problems by doubling cover prices in real terms between 1962 and 1985. But this policy merely redoubled publishers' anxiety about losing readers.

However, the rise in costs was probably the principal driving force behind the pressure to maximize sales. National newspapers more than quadrupled their paging between 1945 and 1975 and almost doubled them again in the subsequent period up to 1996. Their staffs also got bigger and were paid substantially more in real terms. Between 1946 and 1974, the annual costs of the average national and London daily increased fourteen-fold.<sup>12</sup> The circulation war that began in 1981 and led to the largest ever give-away prizes of £1 million in 1985, before switching to lavish advertising promotion in the late 1980s, further fuelled the rise in costs. Soaring expenditure intensified the need to stay ahead in the circulation battle.

How this could be achieved was spelt out in extensive market research commissioned by increasingly anxious publishers. This revealed a remarkable constancy in what people read in national newspapers during the last four decades. The most read items were found to be human interest stories and certain entertainment features because their appeal transcended differences of age, class, and gender. Sport was popular among men, as were women's features among women. However, public affairs coverage attracted generally low average readership scores because it appealed less to women than to men and less to the young than to the over-35s.

The managements of popular newspapers responded by giving more space to content with a common denominator appeal. They expanded human interest content, entertainment features, sports, and women's articles (see Table 4).<sup>13</sup> This growth took place at the expense of public affairs coverage which declined, as a percentage of editorial space, by at least half in all our sample popular papers between 1946 and 1976. Indeed public affairs took up less space than sport in all these papers by 1976.

In effect the make-up of popular papers reverted to a pre-war character in response to similar market pressures. However, the downgrading of political coverage was carried to even more extreme lengths in three sample papers – *The People/Sunday People*, the *Sunday Pictorial/Mirror*, and the *Daily Herald/Sun*. In the last case, public affairs as a proportion of editorial space was down by almost two-thirds in 1976 compared with thirty years earlier. A supplementary content analysis also reveals that public affairs stories were less often chosen as lead, front-page articles in popular newspapers in 1976 compared with 1936. This trend towards depoliticization almost certainly continued in the subsequent period.

The increasingly frenetic pursuit of readers also led to a general lowering of journalistic standards, as reporters came under mounting pressure to come up with good human interest stories. This led to a growing number of wellpublicized excesses: inventing an overnight love tryst between Prince Charles and Lady Diana Spencer on a lonely railway siding in the royal train (*Sunday Mirror*); fabricating a fictitious interview with Mrs Marica McKay, the widow of the Falklands VC hero (*Sun*); touching up a photograph of 'Lady Di' to give a hint of nipples in a low-cut dress (*Sun*); offering 'blood money' to relatives and friends of the

'Yorkshire Ripper', Peter Sutcliffe (*Daily Mail*, *Daily Express*, *Daily Star*, and *News of the World*); pillorying a child as the 'Worst Brat in Britain' without mentioning that he was ill due to contracting meningitis (*Sun*) and, most notoriously of all, reporting as 'The Truth' misleading claims that football hooligans had urinated on police officers, attacked rescue workers, and stolen from injured fans in the Hillsborough football stadium disaster (*Sun*).

### Gap between quality and popular newspapers

To a much greater degree than the popular press, quality papers continued to maintain their commitment to serious political coverage. Between 1936 and 1976, both the *Daily Telegraph* and the *Observer*, for example, actually increased their coverage of public affairs as a percentage of editorial space, while reducing or merely maintaining their human interest content (see Table 4). The very rapid growth in the size of quality newspapers after 1985, and the development of a quality newspaper price war between 1993 and 1995, contributed to a process of popularization. Even so, a significant difference remained between a politicized elite press, and a relatively depoliticized mass press.

This difference is rooted in the historical development of the press, and is attributed usually to the chasm that supposedly separates the sophisticated preferences of educated élites and the more basic interests of the masses. In fact, studies commissioned by publishers during the last sixty years regularly revealed that quality and popular paper readers were rather similar in their likes and dislikes. Thus to take but one example, the most read stories in Sunday quality papers during the period between 1969 and 1971 were human interest stories about ordinary people, followed by human interest stories about celebrities – precisely the most read stories in the *Sunday People* and *Sunday Mirror* during the same period.<sup>14</sup>

The polarization between the two sectors arose primarily from the divergent ways in which they were funded. The quality press generally derived over two-thirds of its revenue from advertising, secured through appealing to highspending, niche audiences. The popular press, on the other hand, obtained over half its revenue from sales and its value to advertisers was rooted in its circulation success. Thus, one sector needed to 'select' its readers as a way of safeguarding its advertising income, while the other needed to build and retain a mass circulation.

These divergent economic pressures affected the way in which each sector related to the market. Popular papers catered for the lowest common denominator of mass demand, in the process ignoring the preferences of a significant minority of the readers who would have liked more public affairs coverage. By contrast, quality papers privileged the politicized minority among the readers as a way of avoiding the indiscriminate expansion of its circulation. This often coincided with the concerns of senior journalists in the quality press.

Table 4 *The editorial contents of selected national daily and Sunday newspapers, 1936–76<sup>a</sup>*

	<i>Daily Express</i>			<i>Daily Herald</i>			<i>Sun</i>			<i>Daily Mail</i>		
	1936	1946	1976	1936	1946	1976	1936	1946	1976	1936	1946	1976
Advertising (proportion of total space)	43	18	44	42	17	40	46	18	36			
Editorial (proportion of total space)	57	82	56	58	83	60	54	82	64			
Photographs <sup>b</sup>	13	7	13	9	5	16	15	7	14			
Illustrations <sup>b</sup>	4	4	5	2	4	6	5	4	5			
Public affairs news <sup>c</sup>	14	29	12	23	34	8	15	27	12			
Public affairs features <sup>c</sup>	4	10	6	10	11	6	4	12	8			
Finance	10	4	7	6	1	1	9	3	10			
Sport	22	18	27	19	20	30	20	19	23			
Human interest news	20	20	16	14	14	14	14	19	17			
Human interest features	10	6	12	8	4	20	15	3	10			
Consumer and Women's features	7	2	4	5	3	2	8	2	5			
Horoscopes, cartoon strips, quizzes, and competitions	4	3	6	3	3	8	3	4	5			
Arts and entertainments	6	4	7	6	4	7	5	5	9			
Other features	5	5	4	6	4	7	7	6	3			

<i>Daily Mirror</i>			<i>Daily Telegraph</i>			<i>Sunday Express</i>			<i>People/Sunday People</i>			<i>Sunday Pictorial/Sunday Mirror</i>			<i>Observer</i>		
1936	1946	1976	1936	1946	1976	1936	1946	1976	1936	1946	1976	1936	1946	1976	1936	1946	1976
29	16	42	47	35	48	51	16	56	38	22	44	24	25	46	46	36	49
71	84	58	53	64	52	49	84	44	62	78	56	76	75	54	54	64	51
21	8	18	8	2	9	14	4	13	11	4	21	26	25	20	3	3	12
7	15	8	1	1	1	4	6	9	2	2	2	6	6	6	1	-	3
10	18	9	19	40	26	8	20	5	10	15	2	7	10	5	20	28	16
2	7	4	3	9	4	10	19	12	4	11	6	10	16	6	6	19	14
4	-	1	20	8	20	5	2	2	1	1	1	2	-	2	7	2	10
15	9	28	14	11	18	21	20	25	25	28	30	18	20	27	17	12	16
21	29	17	14	12	13	15	11	12	18	15	13	11	14	13	7	5	5
27	5	16	10	10	2	23	9	17	23	17	22	15	26	28	6	7	8
6	4	2	3	1	5	4	2	10	3	3	5	8	5	5	4	2	11
6	16	10	1	1	1	4	6	6	8	8	6	14	3	5	3	5	1
4	1	8	6	3	10	3	4	6	3	2	6	7	3	6	25	20	15
7	10	5	9	7	3	8	7	4	7	2	10	9	3	4	5	4	5

Notes: <sup>a</sup>Sample 252 issues. <sup>b</sup>These are also tabulated in terms of their content. <sup>c</sup>Defined as political, social, economic, industrial, scientific, and medical affairs. All figures have been rounded off to the nearest whole number.

Failure to respect these different market rules could produce bizarre consequences, as was demonstrated when *The Times*, under a new owner, Lord Thomson, went for promiscuous growth. Between 1966 and 1969 the paper increased its circulation by 60 per cent through heavy promotion and a more popular editorial approach. However, a substantial number of its new readers were indigent students, lower middle class or even working class. Advertisers objected to paying premium rates for the privilege of reaching readers outside their advertising target group, many of whom could be reached more cheaply through other publications. Consequently, advertising failed to keep up with the rise of circulation, and the paper incurred steeply increasing losses. Thoroughly chastened, *The Times* reversed its policy by raising its price, adopting a more austere editorial policy, and changing its advertising, in a successful bid to lose 96,000 unwanted circulation between 1969 and 1971. When *The Times* went for growth almost a quarter of a century later, it very deliberately targeted its appeal to affluent readers of papers like the *Daily Telegraph* and *Daily Mail*. Even so, its spectacular rise of circulation between 1993 and 1996 also produced heavy losses.

More far-reaching than advertisers' indirect influence on the market orientation of newspapers was their direct impact on the structure of the press. By 1996, five out of ten national dailies served the top end of the market, and accounted for 20 per cent of circulation. The other 80 per cent of the market had to settle for what remained. Under this bifurcated system, the only significant minority papers to survive were those that served advertising-rich audiences. For example, *Today* closed down in 1995 with a circulation of 573,000, significantly more than that of the upscale *Guardian* or *Financial Times* but not enough to keep it alive.

Representation was unequal in terms of weight as well as numbers. The only minority papers which provided detailed coverage of public affairs were those that served and represented élite publics. This gave to these élites a disproportionate influence, and reinforced their domination of British political life.

Economic power was thus converted into ideological power. Yet, this came about not through blackmailing pressure exerted by advertisers on editorial content – the usual concern of radical critics – but through an impersonal process in which influence was largely unsought. Economic inequalities in society gave rise to unequal advertising outlays on the press. This influenced, in turn, what newspapers were available in newsagents, and which sections of society were most forcibly represented by the press in the wider public arena.

### **Curtailement of choice**

The escalating costs of publishing in the first four decades after the Second World War imposed a further limitation on the ideological spectrum of the press. The rise in staffing, paging and promotional expenditure had the effect of stifling competition. Only established national newspaper enterprises, able to economize by making use of existing print capacity

and services, were able to incur the enormous cost of launching a new national paper. Others were excluded or were deterred by the high cost involved. During the 1970s and early 1980s the trade union movement discussed the possibility of starting a new national daily, and even commissioned through the TUC a detailed feasibility study. Reluctantly it concluded in 1984 that it lacked the funds to go ahead with the project despite the fact that its privately commissioned consumer research indicated that there was a substantial market demand for a new left daily.

The only new voices to be heard in Fleet Street merely amplified the existing chorus. In the half century before 1986, just four new national papers were established: the *Sun*, *Daily Star*, *Sunday Telegraph*, and *Mail on Sunday*. All these papers originated from leading press groups, and consolidated their oligopoly. Politically, they were all on the right and strengthened Conservative domination of the national press.

### **The mythologizing of new technology**

Between 1986 and 1989 a technical revolution took place in the national press. Computerized typesetting with direct input by journalists and advertising staff was introduced, and photocomposition fully replaced the manual casting of copy in hot metal type. Pages were designed and made up on computer terminals linked to plate making (an innovation that has not yet been adopted by all national papers) rather than being pasted-up on a board. Powerful, new web-offset machines, requiring fewer production staff, were installed and colour printing was introduced. Facsimile transmission was adopted, enabling the physical separation of editorial and production processes and the simultaneous printing of newspapers at different sites. This reduced distribution costs and facilitated the more intensive use of printing presses.

These technical innovations were accompanied by a revolution in the social organization of production. Thousands of printers were made redundant between 1986 and 1988, and the power of the print unions was broken. The old system of production, in which shop floor control was effectively subcontracted to craft unions, was streamlined into a low-cost, mass-production process controlled by management. After 1989, a number of national publishers also enforced individual contracts with journalists, and derecognized the National Union of Journalists.

The introduction of new technology was funded principally in two ways. Reuters, jointly owned by leading press groups, was floated in 1984 and produced a windfall sale of shares. Most national publishers also sold their historic properties in the centre of London, and moved to cheaper sites. In 1989, the last national newspaper rolled off the last printing press in Fleet Street, marking the end of a historic tradition that goes back almost to the beginning of British journalism.



A skilled public relations campaign prepared the way for this transformation. Press managements argued that computerized technology would transform the national press by reducing costs. New papers would be easy to set up, and minority journalism would flourish with the aid of low-cost technology. These arguments were echoed by distinguished journalists and politicians on the centre-left as well as the right in a general mobilization of public opinion against Fleet Street's printers. 'Murdoch may have done more for the freedom of the press than a dozen Royal Commissions', enthused Bill Rodgers, Vice-President of the SDP, after the press tycoon shed his Fleet Street production workers. Only the intransigence of some in the print unions, argued Ian Aitken, political editor of the *Guardian*, prevented the emergence of 'entirely new newspapers representing all points of view'. His counterpart at the *Observer*, Robert Taylor, also wrote enthusiastically about how new technology would undermine 'the tyranny of the mass circulation press, with its mindless formula journalism appealing to the lowest common denominator'.

The man who initially embodied all these hopes for the future was Eddy Shah, a publisher of freesheets in the north-west and the victor of a famous confrontation with the National Graphical Association. He announced in 1985 to general acclaim that he was setting up a new national daily and Sunday paper in a green field site, miles from Fleet Street, using the latest in print technology. He was widely hailed as the harbinger of a new era.

But it was in fact Rupert Murdoch who made the first, decisive move by building a new printing plant in Wapping, East London. Although he told the print unions that he intended merely to print a new local daily there, he secretly established a large, new plant, costing over £66 million, capable of printing all his national newspapers. An alternative production workforce was recruited with the help of the maverick electricians' union and trained to operate the new technology. An alternative distribution system was also established through an Australian transport company, Thomas Nationwide Transport, to prevent effective sympathy action by organized labour. As a final precaution, Murdoch reconstituted his Wapping plant as a separate company so that picketing by his Fleet Street employees outside Wapping would be technically illegal.

Murdoch then issued an ultimatum to the print unions requiring them to accept a legally binding, no-strike agreement in which 'new technology may be adopted at any time with consequent reductions in manning levels' and in which anyone involved in industrial action during the term of the contract would be dismissed without appeal. The print unions, although agreeing belatedly to new technology and voluntary redundancy, refused to sign an agreement which they believed meant signing away their members' rights. A strike was called and Murdoch's Fleet Street production workers mounted a forlorn, nightly vigil outside the coils of razor wire surrounding the Wapping plant. Their frustration flared into

occasional violence during ritualized mass pickets, which resulted in some print workers being jailed and their unions being heavily fined. After more than a year, the strike was called off amid bitter recriminations.

Murdoch's success was followed by a wave of redundancies in Fleet Street, as rival press groups introduced new technology. New papers were also launched in the period 1986–9, seemingly fulfilling optimistic predictions about the impact of new technology. But these predictions were based, as it turned out, on a myth: the widespread belief that overpaid and underworked print workers accounted for the major part of newspaper costs. In fact, production wages comprised only 21 per cent of Fleet Street costs before new technology was introduced.<sup>15</sup>

'Downsizing' the production force thus did not fundamentally change the economics of publishing. The launch and establishment of new national newspapers still required large resources. *Today* and *Sunday Today* were launched with an initial outlay of £22.5 million; the *Independent* with an establishment fund of £21 million; *News on Sunday* with around £6 million; the *Sunday Correspondent* with £18 million; and the *London Daily News* with an outlay of well over £30 million in its first year.

Outlays remained high because new technology was expensive and had only a limited impact in lowering non-wage costs. Newspapers still had to attain relatively high circulations in order to break even. The run-in period when new papers were building circulation, and trading at a loss, added to the effective establishment cost.

Just how little things had changed was revealed by Shah's supposedly mould-breaking launch of *Today* and *Sunday Today*. Shah's central problem – apart from his lack of editorial and managerial expertise – was, ironically, his lack of sufficient finance. A substantial part of his launch fund was swallowed up setting up a modern plant. This led him to economize on pre-launch preparations which contributed to the production problems and indifferent editorial quality of the early issues of his papers. He then ran out of money after only ten weeks and found it impossible to secure further credit, largely because the equity proportion of his capital amounted to only £8.5 million. As a consequence the first national newspapers to be launched by an outsider in half a century were taken over by a leading press conglomerate, Lonrho. Along with other subsidiary backers, Lonrho injected in 1986–7 a further £24 million into the Today group, effectively doubling the establishment outlay. *Sunday Today* was closed down and *Today* was acquired by the leading monopolist, Rupert Murdoch, who attempted to resuscitate it as a commercial proposition and failed.

One problem Shah shared with other would-be publishers was that he had to leap over the publishing equivalent of a high jump from a very short run-up. The length of the run-up was affected by how much money the publisher was able to spend on getting the paper right, and building a following. The height of the jump depended on the advertising bounty

that readers brought with them. A paper aimed at the working class, like the *News on Sunday*, needed in 1987, using the latest technology, around 800,000 circulation to break even. A paper aimed at the affluent, like the *Independent*, required approximately half this amount in 1988.

The net impact of new technology was modest because it did not substantially lower entry costs or change the distorting role of advertising. Of the small shoal of minnows that swam for a time near the hulks of the established press, only two survived. Casualties included two left papers, *News on Sunday* (1987) and *Sunday Correspondent* (1989–90), the first of which was editorially dismal and both of which were under-capitalized. Shah again attempted with too little money to launch a new national paper, *The Post* (1988), which lasted for only thirty-three issues. The *London Daily News* (1987) was killed off with the help of a short-lived, spoiling paper launched by the monopoly *London Evening Standard*. The only mainstream newspapers to stay the course were the *Independent* and *Independent on Sunday*. However, they only avoided closure by surrendering their independence. Initially, the *Independent* attracted talented journalists, breathed new life into a bi-partisan tradition of journalism, and made great headway in building circulation. It then depleted its limited resources by launching a Sunday paper during a recession, lost momentum, and was finally torpedoed by Murdoch and Black who slashed the prices of rival papers. The *Independent* and *Independent on Sunday* limped into harbour, and were taken over by Mirror Group Newspapers, the second largest press group in the country. The two papers then lost authority, lost circulation, and lost still more money. Sadly, their future is not assured.

The only partial exception to this record of relative failure was the launch of *Sunday Sport* in 1986, and its expansion into a weekday title, *Sport*. These caricatured the excesses of tabloid journalism, with invented stories such as ‘World War II Bomber Found on the Moon’, and its inevitable follow-up ‘World War II Bomber Found on the Moon Vanished’. However, their diet of sport, crime, and pornography, without public affairs coverage, make them specialist publications rather than national newspapers. They are also not very popular: their survival has been due to their paring down of costs, with skeletal staffs, no general news service, and a heavy reliance on cheap, bought-in material rather than to the size of their circulations.

The expansionary period of the national press is now over. The major press groups forestalled the threat of further challenges by forcing up costs. They increased substantially paging levels, held down prices and in the late 1980s poured money into promotion. No new national newspaper has been launched since 1989, apart from the specialist and probably short-lived *Sunday Business* started in 1996. The only new, mainstream national papers that are likely to be established in the foreseeable future are those owned by powerful press groups or maverick multi-millionaires.

In short, the technical transformation of the press never produced a corresponding editorial revolution. It led to a cleaner, cheaper system of production. It gave rise to fatter newspapers with new sections. It added two centrist titles to the already crowded top end of the market. But what it did not do was enrich popular journalism through the establishment of new national papers which served minorities in the mass market, or significantly extended the ideological range of the press. The Fleet Street 'revolution' was a rainbow that came and went, though not before dazzling gullible and impressionable commentators.

### **Retrospect**

During the post-war period, the press became more closely aligned to big business. The ties developed through interlocking ownership were further strengthened, at the top level, by institutional, social, and personal links in a form that encouraged newspaper controllers and business leaders to adopt ideological positions that were more alike.

The shift towards a delegated pattern of control in part of the national press during the 1960s was reversed during the 1970s and 1980s. A new generation of predominantly right-wing proprietors emerged who adopted a more interventionist and personalized style of management. Yet, even in those papers where proprietors were relatively inactive, control was still exercised through the selection of senior management and mediated through the structures of newsgathering and the influence of dominant political values.

The impact of managerial change was reinforced by the impersonal operation of market forces. Rising costs and the redistribution of advertising, following deregulation, helped to decimate the social democratic press, and contributed to the taming and depoliticization of the popular radical papers that survived.

The rightward shift of the press was also a response to a sea-change of opinion. However, the changing complexion of the press overstated the public shift to the right. This was demonstrated by the yawning gap that developed between editorial and electoral opinion, particularly after 1970. In the 1983, 1987, and 1992 general elections, the Conservative Party never secured more than 43 per cent of the vote, yet the Conservative press's share of national daily circulation fluctuated between 64 and 78 per cent.

Partly as a consequence of increasing concentration of ownership, the press failed also to reflect the growing diversity of public opinion. Indeed the national press – although numbering between 17 and 21 titles during the period 1969–96 – had unanimous editorial opinions on a surprising number of issues. For example, every national daily and Sunday paper supported the aborted union 'reforms' proposed by the government in 1969. During the 1975 referendum every national newspaper supported Britain's entry into the EEC. In 1980 every national daily opposed the TUC's 'day of action'. In 1981 every national paper, which expressed an editorial opinion, supported the more right-wing candidate, Denis Healey, in the

Labour Party's deputy leadership contest. In 1985 all national papers applauded Neil Kinnock's attack on the 'hard left' of his party.

Between 1974 and 1993, only two national papers (the *Daily Mirror* and *Sunday Times*) supported briefly the withdrawal of British troops from Northern Ireland, even though this was favoured by the majority in most polls conducted during this period. The Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament won significant minority support, yet lacked the backing of a single national newspaper. Only one national (the *Independent on Sunday*) was explicitly republican despite the fact that by 1996 one in four supported this position.

The rightward drift of the press had significant political consequences. In particular, the closure of large-circulation, centre-left papers removed key institutional props that had helped to sustain a popular radical tradition in early post-war Britain. The *Daily Herald* had provided reinforcement for a Labourist, trade union sub-culture; *Reynolds News* had celebrated the collectivist self-help tradition of the Co-operative movement; the *News Chronicle*, a paper which had periodically upset its post-war owners by being too radical, belonged to an older, ethical Liberal tradition. Together, these three papers reached, on their death-bed, an average issue readership of 9.3 million people.

The trade union movement was also weakened by a sustained press campaign against it during the 1970s and early 1980s. Reporting of industrial relations tended to focus on conflict, framed in terms of its harmful consequences rather than its causes. Thus Denis McQuail found that the three most frequently recurring themes in national daily reports of industrial disputes in 1975 were loss of output, loss of work by those not involved, and inconvenience or danger to the public. Implicitly, strikers were portrayed as being in conflict primarily with the public rather than with their employers. This selective definition was further sustained by under-reporting the role of management. Indeed, actions or statements by employers and their organizations accounted in 1975 for only 2 per cent of the main items of industrial relations reports in national dailies. McQuail found little difference in the pattern of reporting of industrial relations between right-wing Labour and Conservative papers.<sup>16</sup>

The press also mounted a sustained and effective attack on the Labour left. This culminated in the tabloid campaign against 'loony left' councils in 1996-7, the impact of which stemmed from a series of seemingly factual reports featuring left-wing councillors doing manifestly dotty things. Thus individual 'loony left' councils in London were alleged to have banned black bin liners as racist, proscribed the nursery rhyme 'Baa Baa Black Sheep', spent almost £0.5 million on '24 super-loos for gypsies', and insisted that gays should go to the top of the council house waiting list. All these reports proved, on investigation, to be misleading.<sup>17</sup>

Reaching a daily audience of almost two out of three adults even during the mid-1990s, the national press also bolstered the forces of continuity and stability. It generally endorsed the basic tenets of the capitalist system – private enterprise, profit, the 'free market', and the

rights of property ownership. By frequently invoking the consensual framework of the national interest and by projecting positive symbols of nationhood (such as sporting heroes), the press fostered a national identity at the expense of class solidarity. The press also reinforced dominant political and social norms by mobilizing public indignation against a succession of public enemies portrayed in stereo-typical ways – youth gangs, squatters, student radicals, muggers, football hooligans, union militants, urban rioters and gay carriers of the ‘killer plague’.

The press also built support for the social system in less direct and obvious ways. Its focus on political and state office as the seat of power tended to decentre capital and mask the central influence of industrial and financial élites. By regularly reporting political and economic news as disconnected events, it encouraged acceptance of the power structure as natural, part of the way things are. Embedded also in its entertainment features were values and assumptions that were not quite as apolitical as they appeared to be at first sight. Its expanding consumer and lifestyle sections concerned with music, travel, motoring, fashion, homes, health, and personal finance tacitly promoted a seductive view that consumption is a way of expressing self in a real world removed from, and transcending, hierarchies of power. Above all, its greatly enlarged human interest content tended to portray society as an aggregation of individuals, explain events in terms of individual psychology rather than social processes, and to offer individual-moral rather than collective solutions to problems. This conservative, ‘common-sense’ view of the world may have contributed more than explicit political comment to maintaining a social order that successfully renewed itself despite the country’s loss of empire and relative economic decline.

## Notes

- 1 S. Koss, *The Rise and Fall of the Political Press in Britain*, vol. 2 (London, Hamish Hamilton, 1984) p. 4.
- 2 The only partial exception to this was the *Daily Mail* which advocated a Conservative–Liberal coalition in the October 1974 general election.
- 3 MORI, June 1987. This excludes those who were undecided or intended to abstain.
- 4 *IBA Annual Report and Accounts 1985–6* (Independent Broadcasting Authority, London, 1986); *32nd Annual Report of the Press Council 1985* (London, Press Council, 1986); *Jordan’s Review of Marketing and Publishing Data* (London, Jordan, 1984); *British Phonograph Yearbook* (London, 1986); British Videogram Association (unpublished, Gallup, 1986).
- 5 The *Daily Worker/Morning Star* and the more short-lived *Newsline* have not been included as national newspapers since they were not available in most newsagents and, even in the 1980s when both papers were alive, accounted together for less than 0.1 per cent of national daily circulation. They have also been excluded in the assessment of national press content in the last part of this chapter.

- 6 My thanks to Brendan Wall for help in conducting interviews.
- 7 J. W. Hobson, *The Selection of Advertising Media* (London, Business Publications, 1955); J. R. Adams, *Media Planning* (London, Business Books, 1971). There was, however, a reaction against overdependence on quantitative approaches in media planning during the late 1970s.
- 8 'Daily Herald reader interest surveys recommendations', p. 8 (London, Odhams Ltd records, 1955).
- 9 'Attitudes to newspapers and newspaper reading' (London, International Publishing Corporation (IPC) records, 1964), p. 3.
- 10 'Report of an investigation into the transition from the *Daily Herald* to the *Sun*' (London, IPC records, 1968).
- 11 'Report of a survey to study attitudes to daily newspapers' (London, Odhams Ltd records, 1958).
- 12 Estimated from *Royal Commission on the Press 1947-9 Report* (London, HMSO, 1949), Table 4, p. 82, and *Royal Commission on the Press Interim Report* (London, HMSO, 1976), Table E5, p. 96.
- 13 A representative sample (twelve issues of dailies and six of Sundays per year) was selected in a way that gave appropriate weight to each quarter of the year, each week in the month, and each day in the week. A code-recode comparison of a representative sample of 1,491 items yielded 83 per cent agreement in their classification.
- 14 *Sunday Times*, Marketing Research Studies, 1969-71; Sunday Paper Readership Surveys, International Publishing Corporation Marketing and Research Department, 1969-71.
- 15 The latest available figure for the national newspaper press in the pre-new technology period, as reported in *Royal Commission on the Press Interim Report* (London, HMSO, 1976), Table E11, p. 101.
- 16 D. McQuail, *Analysis of Newspaper Content*, Royal Commission on the Press Research Series 4 (London, HMSO, 1977). The impact of this press coverage was reinforced by that of television. See Glasgow University Media Group, *Bad News* (London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1976) and *More Bad News* (London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980).
- 17 Goldsmiths Media Research Group, *Media Coverage of London Councils: Interim Report* (London, Goldsmiths College, University of London, 1987).

## **Part II**

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### *Broadcasting history*

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## *Reith and the denial of politics*

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There are two accounts of the origins of the BBC. The first is that the Corporation was the personal achievement of John Reith. The second is that its emergence was accidental. According to the first view the BBC's monopoly of broadcasting was an inevitable consequence of the Corporation's cultural mission, while for the second, as R. H. Coase has written, 'The problem, to which the monopoly was seen as a solution by the Post Office, was one of Civil Service administration. The view that a monopoly in broadcasting was better for the listener was only to come later.'

These theories appear to conflict. According to one view Reith made history fit his vision. According to the other, a great institution took a particular form because no one appreciated its future importance. Both, however, have a central flaw in common: they disregard political and social change in the world outside broadcasting.

### **Discovering an audience, a director, and the money**

Broadcasting – the transmitting of programmes to be heard simultaneously by an indefinitely large number of people – is a social invention, not a technical one. The capacity to broadcast existed long before it was recognized. 'Wireless telegraphy' was developed during the First World War for military purposes. It was used as a substitute for the telephone, but one with the disadvantage that it was impossible to specify the audience which heard the message. An American engineer, David Sarnoff, first saw the possibilities of radio in 1916. 'I have in mind a plan of development which would make radio a "household utility" like the piano or electricity,' he wrote. 'The idea is to bring music into the house by wireless.'

Yet for some time after popular broadcasting had started in the 1920s, wireless was regarded as little more than an experimental toy. It took Northcliffe, a pioneer in the commercialization of leisure, to demonstrate the potential audience for the new invention. He arranged a promotion stunt for the *Daily Mail*. Dame Nellie Melba was to be broadcast

singing from Chelmsford. This event which began ‘with a long silvery trill’ and ended with *God Save the King* attracted a much larger audience than had been expected. It made the wireless manufacturers aware for the first time of a potentially huge market for them to supply.

In 1922 there were nearly a hundred applications to the Post Office from manufacturers who wanted to set up broadcasting stations. This demand created the need for control. As Peter Eckersley, one of the company’s first employees, wrote later, ‘The BBC was formed as an expedient solution to a technical problem. It owes its existence to the scarcity of air waves.’ The Postmaster General solved the problems of radio interference by persuading rival manufacturers to invest jointly in one small and initially speculative broadcasting station: The British Broadcasting Company. John Reith was made its Managing Director.

How would the BBC have developed if its first director had been a career civil servant, a banker, or a Bloomsbury intellectual? Many of the features of broadcasting which are taken for granted today would certainly be absent. Reith’s domination of the Corporation in its early days was massive, totalitarian, and idiosyncratic, and for many decades the traditions of the BBC seemed to flow directly from his personality. The British Broadcasting Company was set up as a business. Reith turned it into a crusade. ‘Scotch engineer, Calvinist by upbringing, harsh and ruthless in character’, as A. J. P. Taylor has described him, Reith used ‘the brute force of monopoly to stamp Christian morality on the British people’. While waiting to find out whether his application for the directorship had been successful Reith wrote in his memoirs, ‘I kept my faith alive night and morning and encouraged myself with the text “Commit thy way unto the Lord, trust also Him and He shall bring it to pass”’. Later he was to exhort his staff to dedicate themselves to ‘humility in the service of higher pursuits. The desire for notoriety and recognition’, he warned, ‘sterilizes the seeds from which greatness might spring.’

This ability to impose his will on staff was helped by his size. Churchill nicknamed him ‘Wuthering Heights’ and senior staff would stand on stairs to argue with him, ‘so that I can see you eye to eye, Sir’. His administrative style, and indeed his private diary, were characterized by abuse. Memoranda sent to Reith would return peppered with ‘rubbish’, ‘stupid’, ‘soft minded idiocy’, ‘he lies’. Frequently he saw his life in nautical terms: the Corporation was a ship and he was at the helm. He was pompous, humourless, arrogant, and, like most megalomaniacs, paranoid and self-pitying. Yet the near absurdity of his vision enabled him to foresee the power of the new service.

Broadcasting was to be financed partly by a tariff on wireless sets, and partly by a licence fee. These sources soon proved inadequate for the rapidly expanding station. Listeners evaded the tariff by building their own sets with cheap foreign components. They then evaded the full licence fee by applying for experimental licences. The BBC complained, and the manufacturers were angry that the monopoly of wireless production was not proving as

profitable as they had hoped. Hence in 1923 the Sykes Committee was set up by the Post Office to inquire into the Company's finances. This rejected advertising as a source of revenue because 'The time devoted to it . . . would be very small and therefore exceedingly valuable.' Radio advertising would interfere with market competition by favouring large firms. Instead the report recommended that a simple licence fee should be raised to finance the service.

The Crawford Committee, two and a half years later, unquestioningly accepted the necessity of a broadcasting monopoly, and recommended that the private company be replaced by a 'Public Commission operating in the National Interest'. The service was felt to have outgrown the petty limits of a business enterprise. 'Formed at a moment when broadcasting was still embryonic - regarded by many as a toy, a fantasy, even a joke,' the report argued, 'the company by strenuous application to its duties aided by the loyalty of its staff has raised the service to a degree which reflects high credit on British efficiency and enterprise.'

In 1926 the British Broadcasting Company closed, and the new British Broadcasting Corporation opened. Reith was delighted that the unique status of his organization was recognized. 'The Royal Academy and the Bank of England function under Royal Charter,' proclaimed the 1927 *Handbook*. 'So does the BBC. It is no Department of State.'

### **The BBC as a public corporation**

The BBC came to be seen, in the words of William Robson, as a 'sociological invention of immense significance', and a 'breathtaking administrative innovation'. Hilda Matheson, the first head of the Talks Department, wrote in 1933 that the Corporation was 'wholly in keeping with the British constitution, and it is more and more common to find it quoted as a possible model for the management of other national services for which private control and direct state management are equally unsuitable'. What, then, was the novelty of the BBC's organization and to what extent was Reith responsible for it?

Reith did not invent the notion of a public corporation. Neither did the Corporation simply emerge accidentally. Reith exploited a theory because it was convenient to do so. The Post Office, which played a critical role in the BBC's development, was itself an early example of a nationally run business. William Beveridge had commented in 1905 that the GPO was the 'one socialist experiment . . . that now works well'. Forestry, water, and electricity were all important public corporations set up in the years before the BBC was even thought of. Lincoln Gordon, the economist, wrote that by the 1920s, 'Public boards had become all the rage, politicians of every creed when confronted with an industry or a social service which was giving trouble or failing to operate efficiently – create a board.'

The First World War had been critical in establishing the conditions for the acceptance of a 'Public Service Utility'. Despite bitter opposition the centralized control of health, insurance, coal, and ultimately the rationing of food had been introduced. These were seen as exceptional wartime measures. By the 1920s, however, a generation of reformers who had been civil servants during the war were experienced in organizing the centralized distribution of resources. Indeed for a brief period after the war even the government accepted a more interventionist role. The BBC was formed in this period.

The development of the public corporation depended on the rejection of both market forces and politics in favour of efficiency and planned growth controlled by experts. Briggs has pointed out that the acceptance of the BBC and its monopoly was a consequence of the 'substantial and influential support' the Company received between 1924 and 1925. The monopoly remained in Reith's keeping because 'a large number of important people and a large section of the interested public felt that it was right that this should be so'. These influential people were those who were personally impressed by Reith: the Post Office officials; the director of the wireless manufacturers' association; even the Prime Minister, Baldwin.

However, the idea of the BBC also had more general support. There was a widespread dissatisfaction with the *ad hoc* nature of industrial competition. Even in the 1920s, during the first post-war slump, there was a sense that there must be alternative ways to manage the distribution of resources. Men like Beveridge, who had demonstrated the justice of centralized control in the arrangements for social security and in the rationing of food during the First World War, were opposed to the social consequences of industrial competition. In 1934 Beveridge was to argue:

In a free market economy consumers can buy only that which is offered to them, and that which is offered is not necessarily that which is most advantageous. It is that which appears to give the best prospect of profit to the producer.

This kind of attitude, which Beveridge later developed and popularized in his broadcasts, was surprisingly widely held in the early 1920s. For example Sir Stephen Tallents, who was to play a prominent role in the BBC as well as in the British documentary movement, had worked on rationing with Beveridge, and held very similar opinions. Reith's view that capitalist competition was not wrong but could be inefficient was therefore hardly original.

The BBC was to be used repeatedly as a prototype of the public corporation, especially by Herbert Morrison. Perhaps the feature which particularly attracted socialist writers was the BBC's distance from the world of capitalist industry. The Corporation made no profits. But in addition the goods it made, programmes, were in theory accessible to an infinite number of consumers. It was also a completely new enterprise with no capitalist inheritance to weigh it

down. As Robson wrote, 'The BBC is an engine of the mind . . . it represents socialized control not encumbered with compensation.'

It was this aspect of broadcasting which Reith grasped. He argued that it was in the very nature of the medium that it should be available for all, for it 'ran as a reversal of the natural law that the more one takes, the less there is left for others'. In broadcasting, he wrote, 'There is no limit to the amount which may be drawn off. It does not matter how many thousands there may be listening; there is always enough for others.'<sup>1</sup> In order to exploit broadcasting fully, Reith had argued, it must be governed by social and not financial priorities.

Thus considerations of profit would have restricted the service to the populous urban areas. Reith was determined that the BBC must serve the whole nation. However, Reith also saw that a national service was vital for the defence of the Corporation's monopoly. 'About a week ago', he wrote in 1923, 'we got wind of a projected attack.' This was to be 'based on the grounds that under the present system we had already reached the limits of our expansion. The deduction to be drawn was that the British people would never be supplied with adequate services unless the principle of competitive commercialism were admitted.' Reith rejected commerce because it would have diminished his empire and lowered its status. But he also believed it to be inefficient in the management of national resources. Many shared this view.

Even the government had come to see some kinds of goods as exceptional. In 1927 the film industry, suffering from foreign competition, was protected by import controls, because films were of 'outstanding national importance'. The BBC had been established because the government was anxious not to exercise unfair patronage by granting a monopoly to any one commercial company. But it had also been considerably affected by the report of a Post Office official, F. J. Brown, on a visit to the USA where 'an epidemic of broadcasting was raging'. Thousands of American companies had started broadcasting and President Hoover had demanded central control over the new technology, claiming that it was as if '10,000 telephone subscribers were crying through the air for their mates'. As a result of interference, Hoover declared, 'the ether will be filled with frantic chaos'.<sup>2</sup> The British government realized on the basis of the American experience that broadcasting was a new kind of resource whose management demanded a new form of administration.

The BBC was founded on a rejection of politics. From the start of broadcasting there had been anxieties that the service would become an agency of government propaganda. Sir Charles Trevelyan, a Labour representative on the Sykes Committee, asked the Company's lawyer whether 'for public reasons a government could intervene to prevent anything it regarded as undesirable being broadcast'. He was told that there might be control of the news, but that a government was unlikely to bother with concerts, lectures, speeches, or the weather.

While Reith believed that the BBC should be above politics, politicians at first believed the BBC to be beneath them. Direct public ownership was rejected because it was felt 'A Member might well shrink from the prospect of having to defend in Parliament the various items in a government concert.'

Reith despised politicians and disliked party politics. Although at various times he had political ambitions, he hated the ‘toadying, the cringing pursuit of popularity’ which he believed characterized politics. ‘It is pathetic’, he wrote, ‘how apprehensive Labour leaders are of their followers and how little control they seem to have over them.’ Reith often misjudged the significance of political events (he felt that the split and collapse of the Labour government in 1931 was unimportant, ‘Silly, over money’). ‘The whole horrid technique of politics should be abolished,’ he wrote in his diary. ‘Government of a country is a matter of proper administration, in other words efficiency. It need not be different in nature from the government of a business – only in degree’ (29 November 1936). Perhaps the most significant feature of Reith’s distaste was the sense that politics led to vacillation and compromise when firm government was needed. Reith was not alone in this view. Indeed an interest developed during the late 1920s and early 1930s, from the extreme right to the fellow travelling left – and including the Keynesian centre – in the benefit of planning.

‘The Next Five Years Group’ and Political and Economic Planning (known then as PEP!) were groups involving members with different political allegiances but who were agreed on the need for more social planning. ‘It may be’, wrote one reformer in *The New Outlook*, ‘that the Party structures will act for some time as an obstacle in the way of new developments.’ Macmillan summed up this position:

Most of us recognize that the old system of free unplanned Capitalism has passed away. Most of us agree that a leap forward to complete state planning is politically impossible. But . . . our search is for some practical scheme of social organization . . . which is neither.<sup>3</sup>

On the left, the XYZ club and the New Fabian Research Bureau soon became the natural home for planners and economists.

It has been argued by Scannell and Cardiff that the BBC legitimized its model of broadcasting, not by the huge audience the service soon attracted, but by reference to the élite of ‘the great and the good who trooped into studios to educate and inform on every subject from unemployment to the Origin of the Species: Shaw, Wells, the Webbs, Beveridge, Keynes and Huxley – the roll call is endless’. Broadcasting, they argue, was dominated by a specific, reforming, fraction of the middle class. ‘They saw themselves as superior to the aristocracy, for they were efficient and uncorrupt, and claiming to act for the general good, they presumed (naturally) to speak and act on behalf of the working classes.’ Robert Skidelsky has argued that Keynes’s economic theories provided the basis for a new liberal politics in the 1940s, which avoided class struggle and yet implied ‘Keynes’s most

characteristic belief: that public affairs should and could be managed by an elite of clever and disinterested public servants' (*Encounter*, April 1979). The BBC provided a cultural institution which performed the same function. Indeed the economic and political structure of the BBC was also a product of the experience and beliefs of this reforming intelligentsia. Reith's view of what he intended the BBC to be, those pressures he perceived as threatening, and the alternatives he rejected, were typical of what has been seen as a 'middle opinion'. Indeed it might be claimed that the success of the BBC vindicated the view that a strong middle-class consensus lay beneath the dissent and turmoil of the 1930s.

However, this view should perhaps be modified. Marwick has admitted in an article called 'Middle opinion in the thirties' that 'They did not in their own day achieve much, these advocates of political agreement, the "soft centre" as they were not unjustly called.' Indeed, the 'great and the good' were, as Hugh Dalton wrote in 1936, 'more or less eminent persons who are disinclined to join any existing political party, but who are prepared to collaborate with others in writing joint letters to the Press, and in such organizations as the Next Five Years Group'. They were a band of leaders – but they had no followers. As Pimlott has argued in *Labour and the Left in the 1930s*, their policies might have developed 'into the basis of a powerful campaign for a British New Deal as a frontal assault on mass unemployment'.<sup>4</sup> But in fact the supporters of middle opinion were politically isolated. Keynes and Beveridge had to wait until the Second World War to see their ideas implemented. Yet the BBC was not merely a dream or a plan for reform. It was a rapidly growing institution. By the middle of the 1930s it had become an established and central component of British culture.

Perhaps pressures other than those of the liberal intelligentsia were at work in the making of the BBC? Certainly, unlike Beveridge's plans for insurance, the BBC cost the government no money. The personal connections of the BBC producers were with Bloomsbury literati rather than with liberal reformers. Reith was more an evangelist than a liberal. 'Anything in the nature of a dictatorship is the subject of much resentment these days,' he wrote in 1924. 'Well somebody has to give decisions.' While liberals planned, Reith bullied, wheedled, and built an empire. 'It is occasionally indicated to us that we are apparently setting out to give the public what we think they need and not what they want – but few know what they want, and very few what they need.'

Reith was authoritarian and successful. In the 1930s the new liberals were neither. Moreover, although they dominated broadcast talks, this category hardly dominated the BBC's output. Despite Reith's preoccupation with culture, contemporary critics most frequently accused the Corporation of Philistinism. 'The company undoubtedly saw itself as a cultural force', wrote R. S. Lambert, 'by which it meant something constituted to avoid the postures of vulgarity.' Perhaps the BBC was less dominated by the concerns of the



liberal intelligentsia and more successful in the 1930s because it was paternalist. Perhaps, also, it gave the public what it wanted rather more than Reith was prepared to admit. For, as the BBC *Handbook* shows, by 1934 the BBC was broadcasting more light music, comedy, and vaudeville than any other European station. It was hardly the stuff of social revolution.

### **The BBC and political independence**

How was the BBC's independence from partisan political pressure to be achieved? The directors of the private company were replaced by publicly appointed Governors in 1926. These were to be the trustees of the public interest. At first the Governors and Reith disagreed about how the responsibility should be divided between them.

Thus Philip Snowden's wife Ethel – described in Beatrice Webb's diaries as having 'caricatured social climbing' (19 March 1932) – arrived at the BBC expecting an office, a secretariat, and a full-time job. Appointed a Governor as a 'convenient representative of both Labour and Women', she believed the Director General should play an administrative role, and that the Governors should make all policy decisions. Reith detested her, and commented that she thought that 'there ought to be a board meeting every day . . . an abominable exhibition by her. A truly terrible creature, ignorant, stupid and horrid.' He saw her as a threat to his own position. Indeed he was quite correct to do so. Hugh Dalton, the Labour politician, recorded in his diary (3 August 1930) that Ethel Snowden had asked G. D. H. Cole – another Governor – to help her get rid of Reith. 'Who would she suggest as his successor?' Cole had asked. 'I would gladly take it on myself,' Ethel had replied.

Herbert Morrison wrote in his important work on nationalization, *Socialization and Transport*, 'It is a matter of argument whether the Director General of Broadcasting should, or should not, be a strong personality.' Reith's views were quite straightforward: he wanted to be in control, and he wanted the Governors to back up his decisions.

The Corporation was supposed to be independent and non-partisan: in practice it was not even indirectly accountable to Parliament. In a Report on the Machinery of Government written in 1918, the Webbs had opposed the increased use of public corporations because

when a board is set up without explicit status provided for ministerial responsibility to parliament – the situation is obviously unsatisfactory. Only ministerial responsibility provides safeguard for the citizen . . . and consumer.

However, these objections were not understood. The government had felt in 1925 that 'The progress of science and the harmony of art would be hampered by too rigid rules and too constant supervision by the state.' So, between Reith, anxious to avoid having the content of

broadcasting politically manipulated, and therefore determined to evade political control, and the government, anxious to avoid responsibility for trivia, the BBC was left with no effective accountability. This omission came to be treated as though it were a principle. Herbert Morrison later claimed to have invented it. Robson wrote in 1935 that it was

in strict conformity with the English tradition . . . derived as a practical expedient to perform a particular function, without any concern for general principles – or indeed any awareness that questions of principle were involved.

It is perhaps better seen as the elevation of an uneasy compromise into an ideal type.

### **The BBC and the General Strike**

The BBC's practical interpretation of impartiality was soon tested during the General Strike in 1926. Reith knew that the survival of the Corporation (whose constitution had not yet been formally accepted) depended on its conduct during the crisis.

One effect of the strike was to create a national audience for broadcasting. At the end of 1926 Hilda Matheson was able to write, 'The public and wireless listeners are now nearly synonymous terms.' Beatrice Webb noted in her diary that 'The sensation of the General Strike centres around the headphones of the wireless set.' Although there were only 2 million licence holders these represented a far greater number of listeners, and 'communal listening' was a feature of the crisis as people gathered in halls and outside shops to hear the news.

The BBC seemed more important because of the absence of all other sources of information. An old age pensioner in the 1950s told Julian Symons that he still had 'the little homemade crystal set which worked lovely with the iron bedstead for an aerial . . . and which told me what was *really happening*'. Despite the inadequacy of its news the Corporation emerged from the strike with a national audience and increased authority.

Another effect of the General Strike was that the BBC invented modern propaganda in its British form. During the First World War persuasive techniques had been crude. All Germans were characterized as vicious beasts intent on murdering children and raping nuns. Anthony Smith has argued that a rejection of the

propagandists of the First World War, and the ensuing reaction against the black-out that they had perfected were among the profoundest influences on the men who came to lay the foundations of broadcasting in the early nineteen twenties.

The First World War view of propaganda was still accepted by many during the strike. Its main proponent was Churchill and its main instrument the *British Gazette*. This was a daily news-sheet that few took seriously, so evidently biased were its contents. Churchill wanted to commandeer the BBC, as the government had the right to do. Reith argued that if the BBC was taken over the strikers would merely close the service down. Apart from destroying 'the pioneer work of +3g years', by shattering public confidence in broadcasting, 'It was no time for dope, even if the people could have been doped.' He argued that to suppress information was likely to exacerbate the crisis. His most telling point was that by gaining the trust of both strikers and the government the BBC could positively facilitate a resolution of the crisis:

In the end conciliations of some kind must supervene and . . . the BBC could act as a link to draw together the contending parties by creating an atmosphere of good will towards its service on both sides.

Reith argued that the trust gained by 'authentic impartial news' could then be used. It was not necessarily an end in itself.

He stated, however, that 'Since the BBC was a national institution and since the Government in this crisis was acting for the people . . . *the BBC was for the Government in the Crisis too.*'

Indeed it was Reith's own political judgement which controlled policy throughout the strike. Briggs has pointed out:

He preferred mediation to showdown. If his views had coincided with those of the sponsors of the *British Gazette* he would have had fewer qualms about allowing the BBC to fall directly into the hands of the government. As it was, his personal conviction gave strength to his resistance on constitutional principles.

Reith, as another writer, Patrick Renshaw, has argued, 'would have supported the union against the owners. But he was certainly not prepared to support the TUC against the Government.' However, Reith's 'distinct' view seems very close to that of the most implacable opponent of the strike, Churchill. Martin Gilbert argues that Churchill was quite prepared to accept a conciliatory policy towards the resolution of the coal-miners' dispute with the owners; it was only the general and political strike he was opposed to.

Until 1926 the press had prohibited the BBC from collecting any news. The strike allowed the Company to develop a news service of its own. This reported statements by the strikers as well as the strike-breakers. One of the bulletins on 4 May started with the TUC statement, 'We have from Land's End to John O'Groats reports of support that have surpassed our expectations.'

During the strike no representative of organized labour was allowed to broadcast, and the Leader of the Opposition, Ramsay MacDonald, was also banned. These restrictions were imposed by the government. Reith thought them wrong, but said he could do nothing about them. Willie Graham, one of the strike leaders, wrote angrily to him:

The Government emphatically deny that they interfere with the BBC in any way. On the other hand the company states that it was not a free agent. I am sure that you will agree that it is impossible to make any sense of these two statements.

Called by some workers the 'British Falsehood Corporation', the BBC learnt how to censor itself during the strike in order to forestall government intervention. Nevertheless the General Strike marks the end of the propaganda based on lies and the start of a more subtle tradition of selection and presentation.

Throughout the strike the government had emphasized that the strikers were politically motivated and hence unconstitutional. The BBC emerged from the crisis with an ethic of political neutrality, which was expressed as much in the tone of its broadcasts as in any formal regulations. This was to have profound consequences for politics.

### **Governments and the BBC in the 1930s**

The General Strike initiated a pattern that was to recur throughout the 1930s: the BBC was forced to pass off government intervention as its own decision. In 1935 it was proposed to include talks by a communist and a fascist – Harry Pollitt and Sir Oswald Mosley, respectively – in a series on the British constitution. The Foreign Office protested, arguing that Pollitt could not be allowed to broadcast as he had recently made a speech supporting armed revolution. The BBC responded by referring the matter to the Governors, who declared that, 'More harm than good could be done if a policy were adopted of muzzling speeches.' A BBC official told the Foreign Office, 'We can't chuck Pollitt unless, under our charter, we are given instruction from government that he is not to broadcast.'

The Foreign Office remained adamant that Pollitt should not broadcast. They suggested, however, that the question could resolve itself into the undesirability of *Mosley* speaking.<sup>5</sup> The matter was finally brought to an end when the Postmaster General wrote to Reith pointing out that as the Corporation licence was due for renewal, it would be wiser to comply with government demands. The BBC then asked for permission to say why the programmes had been banned.

The government reacted sharply. According to a Cabinet minute:

It would be neither true nor desirable to state publicly that the talks would be an ‘embarrassment to the Government’ at the present time. But it would be true to say that ‘they would not be in the national interest’.

Despite the feeling of Corporation officials like Tallents and Graves that the BBC’s chances of survival were better if it were seen to be acting in strict accordance with the Charter, the series was dropped and no mention made of government pressure.

An even more remarkable example of the BBC’s relationship with the government occurred in the period immediately before the outbreak of the Second World War. On 25 August 1939 the Labour leaders Hugh Dalton and Harold Laski, together with the General Secretary of the TUC, Walter Citrine, wanted to broadcast a direct personal message and warning to the German people. In an interview with them, the Director General of the BBC, Ogilvie (who had replaced Reith in 1938), refused to tell them whether their request would be granted. In the event, news that a ‘statement’ had been made was broadcast, but nothing whatsoever was mentioned about its contents.

Ogilvie, Dalton pointed out, clearly wanted to consult the Foreign Office but refused to admit this. The next day the Labour leaders complained to the Foreign Secretary, Halifax, of the way in which the BBC had treated them. By this time Ogilvie apparently claimed that he had told Dalton and Citrine that he was going to consult the Foreign Office.

Walter Citrine complained to Halifax that ‘Our people are getting pretty fed up with being expected to shout with the government one day and being treated like a lot of children or nobodies the next.’ He went on to say that Ogilvie (who had been a Conservative MP) ‘might be good enough to help them [the Tories] collect material to rag Lloyd George with – but that doesn’t satisfy me that he is fit to be Director General of the BBC’.<sup>6</sup> This incident demonstrates the continuous and insidious dependence of the Corporation on the government. It is not merely that the decision whether to broadcast the message was referred to the Foreign Office. In addition, Ogilvie was predicting Foreign Office policy, and indeed covering for it. Earlier, the BBC had been concerned to make government pressure on its decisions public. In 1939 it was protecting the Foreign Office, and passing off Foreign Office demands as its own policy.

Since 1927 the BBC had been strenuously courting government departments in an attempt to evade press restrictions on its reporting. ‘We ought to be the arbiters of what Government news goes out,’ wrote a Corporation official, ‘not a commercial company like Reuters.’<sup>7</sup> A close relationship with civil servants grew up and government pressure was often exercised informally and personally. ‘Vansittart would like the BBC to get pro-France in our news and stop using words like insurgent,’ Reith wrote in his diary in 1937. The Corporation was most concerned that disputes with governments should not be resolved by the emergence of any official regulations.

This cautious self-protection was shrewd, and may have been the only strategy available. However, it made the BBC vulnerable to bullying. At various times it was implied that the licence fee might not be allowed to rise, or even that the Corporation's licence to broadcast might be terminated. As a result the most important constraint came to be the Corporation's anxiety to pre-empt the threats.

### **The BBC, society, and programmes**

During a decade of depression and industrial decline, the BBC grew, quadrupled its staff, raised salaries, and acquired vast buildings. One writer, D. G. Bridson, recalled his shock at being asked to work for the BBC. 'In 1935 I mentally bracketed it with Parliament, the Monarch, the Church and the Holy Ghost,' he wrote.

However, the Corporation also intended to become part of the Establishment. Its development into an authoritative institution was a complex process. This was expressed in the choice of outside broadcasters, and what they were allowed to say. It was also expressed in how the Corporation treated them, and its own staff. It was expressed in the distance between what it claimed to do and what it did.

In a decade of hunger marches and 'red united fighting fronts', the BBC regarded a succession of royal broadcasts as the triumph of outside broadcasting and actuality reporting. Broadcasting in the 1930s was dominated by state openings, royal anniversaries, visits, deaths and births, and by the Coronation. 'The floral decorations for His Majesty's broadcast', ran one press release, 'will be one bowl of hiskura (mauve) and a small vase of grape hyacinths.'

In 1923 Reith had exercised a servile cunning in his attempt to persuade the Dean of Westminster to allow the Duke of York's wedding to be broadcast. It would, he suggested, even have advantages 'from the devotional point of view'. Many who 'by sheer force of circumstance, or negligence had little to do with the Church' would hear the 'measured cadence of the sacred words'.<sup>8</sup> The experience, Reith implied, might change their hearts.

Reith's greatest coup was the annual Christmas message delivered by the Monarch. These events were usually preceded by an 'Empire programme', making contact with far-flung colonial stations. 'Goodbye Wilmington', ran one, 'and a Happy Christmas to you all . . . behind us the mountains which encircle Vancouver are still lost in darkness . . . though a faint radiance announces that dawn is on its way.'<sup>9</sup> George V's funeral resulted in an eighty-page BBC policy document, 'Procedures on the death of a sovereign'.

Reith and the Corporation did not merely present traditional pageantry to a wider audience. They established a new manner for royalty which was more appropriate to the twentieth century. Reith made suggestions for what royalty should say, and how they should say it. He recognized what kinds of occasion a royal presence would grace – and benefit from.

One of the bitterest complaints of Reith's old age was his omission from royal Garden Party invitation lists. He felt he had 'done much to serve the House'. Indeed the BBC was responsible, at least in part, for moulding a new domestic and populist image for the Monarchy.

The BBC was a little less sensitive to the needs of trade unionists. One of the clearest aspects of what came to be known as the 'William Ferrie incident', was the incomprehension of the Corporation's bourgeois but liberal-minded staff, when confronted with a worker.<sup>10</sup> Ferrie, a communist trade unionist, was invited to reply to a talk given by Sir Herbert Austin, who had spoken on the immense improvement of working-class conditions during the twentieth century. This was in 1932. Ferrie committed the Corporation equivalent of original sin by departing from his written script when he reached the microphone. He began to tell the public how the BBC had censored him, and horrified Corporation officials rushed to fade out the programme. Ferrie later wrote:

I was particularly incensed at their demand that I should put across that the slogan 'Workers of the World Unite' is not a revolutionary slogan. I also refused to drop my h's and talk as they imagine a worker does.

His talk had quite clearly been altered to make it more politically acceptable. But the way in which it was done is even more revealing. The BBC censored him in ways that the officials would hardly have recognized as such. 'Your language', commented Mary Adams, 'was too literary and impersonal.' Ferrie, to her surprise, came 'in an agitated state', to see her at her Chelsea home. He arrived at the studio with three colleagues 'for support'. All of this seemed odd to middle-class BBC producers, even though Mary Adams was sympathetic to the union case. It seems in retrospect a perfectly regular way for a working-class trade unionist to deal with an institution that seemed bent on intimidating him.

The BBC was more intentionally autocratic in its treatment of its own staff. Reith would banish rebels from the centre of the empire to the periphery. 'You're a very dangerous man Harding,' Bridson recalls Reith telling one, 'I think you'd better go up North where you can't do so much damage.' Indeed by 1937 the only doubts about the Corporation's monopoly were centred on the rights of its staff. There were several symptomatic scandals during the 1930s. The first was the forced resignation of P. P. Eckersley, an engineer and programme innovator of enormous talent who had worked for the Corporation since 1926. Eckersley wrote his own epitaph, 'He had ideas: We stopped them.' He was obliged to resign because he was cited in a divorce case.

The second was over the pressure brought to bear on the editor of the *Listener*, R. S. Lambert, to discourage him from continuing with a libel action. Lambert was warned that he had no future career in the Corporation if he pursued the case. Later he argued that 'This

opinion crystallized the dangerous doctrine that the individual owes more loyalty to his employer, than to his fellow employees.'

Reith's view was succinct. 'It's a mug's game', he wrote in a book called *Personality and Career*, 'to pull contrary to your boss.' In 1937 the Ullswater Report recommended, under pressure from Attlee, that a Staff Association should be set up, and for the first time the BBC's workers had organized representation.

The BBC saw itself as a humane and enlightened employer, which had always pursued strictly egalitarian and meritocratic appointment procedures. In 1934 an internal report commented complacently that there was 'a good proportion of women to men on the staff'. This was true, but most of the women were secretaries.

Hilda Matheson and Mary Somerville had set up the key Talks Department and the Education Service when the Company started. It was a woman's initiative which had started the Sound Archive. Women, however, were never announcers, rarely presenters, and the proportion of women in administrative and creative posts declined. Between 1926 and 1936 the Corporation's staff had increased fourfold yet, as the BBC's annual reports show, the number of women in creative jobs had risen by little more than one-third, and in senior administrative positions by barely one-quarter.

Nevertheless, the atmosphere in the BBC, a new exciting glamorous place where it was better, as Peter Eckersley remarked, 'to have discreet affairs than to remarry', is summed up by Maurice Gorham:

The BBC secretaries were beginning to bloom though they reached full flower later. By that time many of them were pin money girls. It was a great sight to see them going out at lunch, high heeled, sheer stockinged, beautifully made up, talking disdainfully in high clear voices.

By the 1930s the BBC had become an august institution. It was not a crude agent of the status quo, rather it advocated acceptable change, in some areas, in certain circumstances, sometimes.

### **The BBC and journalism**

Indeed, by the end of the decade the sheer amount of news that broadcasting and the press were flooded with was so large that, had it wished to, a government could hardly have pre-censored it all. However, a new tradition in reporting imposed new criteria of selection on the news. Journalists stopped being passionate advocates, saw themselves rather as independent professionals, and their writing as a negotiated product of conflict between partisan views.



This self-image and its practical consequences were most fully developed in the BBC. Reith was not opposed to conflict. On the contrary, he fought the press for the right to broadcast on contentious issues. But the BBC and the new 'professional journalist' retained a monopoly over deciding its limits.

### **The BBC and appeasement**

The BBC's brokerage was subject to pressure. In the eyes of the BBC's programme-makers, politics was an activity which only happened between major political parties. Two kinds of political dispute never reached the air waves: divisions within parties and the expressive politics of the streets. Winston Churchill, repeatedly excluded from broadcasting because his views were seen as eccentric, wrote to Reith saying he wished he could buy broadcasting time. He preferred the American commercial system 'to the present British method of debarring public men from access to a public who wish to hear'. In 1933 Churchill and Austen Chamberlain complained that the BBC 'had introduced an entirely new principle of discrimination into British public life, namely the elimination from broadcasting of any Members of Parliament who were not nominated by the Party leaders or the Party Whip'. Such a crucial innovation, they protested, should be decided by parliament, not arbitrarily imposed by the BBC.<sup>11</sup>

The most important dispute the BBC ignored, and one which cut across party loyalties, was that of the government's policy of appeasing German territorial ambitions. Churchill claimed that the BBC conspired with the press to exclude all opponents of this policy from any access to the public. Gilbert and Gott have suggested that appeasers were effective for so long mainly because of their success in keeping the opponents of German rearmament out of public office. However, the control of public knowledge and opinion was also crucial. An early reference to Polish rearmament lost a producer his job in 1932. Speakers were banned because of their hostility to the fascist states. Later, the BBC was to apologize for its attitude during the 1930s by explaining that, while mistaken, it was merely following the trend of opinion of the times. Yet the BBC's silence is extraordinary as it was itself making extensive plans for the Corporation's conduct and survival during a possible war.

Reith's diary first mentions preparations for war in 1933: plans for the physical protection of transmitters and broadcasting stations were in hand by 1935; Reith was involved in discussions over the organization of a Ministry of Information in the event of war by 1936; details of trains in which to send personnel from London were established by 1937. Thus the BBC was secretly preparing for a war which it did not officially expect, while the public were kept in ignorance of these cautious foresights.

### The BBC at the end of the decade

Reith resigned in 1937, restless and dissatisfied. The BBC no longer stretched him, and he hoped for something better which never came. Increasingly, as the prospect of high office receded, he regarded the Corporation which he had created with resentment. It had not, he came to feel, treated him well.

By the end of the 1930s the BBC seemed a natural and inevitable solution to the problem of administering a national broadcasting system. It had won the right to discuss controversial politics against the determined opposition of suspicious governments and a jealous press. But it developed unnecessary conventions, and had become too defensive. The real test of the Corporation's independence was to come during the Second World War.

### Notes

- 1 J. W. C. Reith, *Broadcast Over Britain* (London, Hodder & Stoughton, 1924), p. 52.
- 2 F. J. Brown, 'Broadcasting in Britain', *London Quarterly Review*, 145, 3 (January 1926).
- 3 H. Macmillan, 'Looking forward' in the Next Five Years Group, *The New Outlook*, 1 (8 May 1937).
- 4 See B. Pimlott, *Labour and the Left in the 1930s* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1977).
- 5 'The citizen and his government' (1935–6), *BBC Written Archives*.
- 6 The unpublished diary of Hugh Dalton (25–29 August 1939). For a further development of this affair, see J. Seaton and B. Pimlott, 'The struggle for balance: the BBC and the Labour Movement 1920–45' in J. Seaton and B. Pimlott (eds), *Politics and the Media in Britain* (Aldershot, Gower, 1987).
- 7 'Relationship between the government and the BBC: the Foreign Office', *BBC Written Archives*.
- 8 Duke of York's wedding, *BBC Written Archives* (Royalty).
- 9 Christmas broadcasts, *BBC Written Archives* (Royalty).
- 10 The William Ferrie incident, *BBC Written Archives*.
- 11 The Churchill and Chamberlain complaint, *BBC Written Archives* (Churchill).

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## *Broadcasting and the blitz*

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The 'Dunkirk spirit' and the comradeship of the air-raid shelter during the blitz have long been part of our national self-image. How much was this myth and how much reality? Officials concerned with civilian morale in the Ministry of Information and the Home Office who had seen ordinary people as unintelligent and weak during the phoney war in 1939 came to see them as dependable, shrewd, and courageous by 1940. What was the cause of this change?

It is clear that the BBC, almost certainly the most important instrument of domestic propaganda during the war, conducted a campaign intended to convince the public of its own endurance and solidarity. The BBC emerged from the war as both a symbol and an agent of the victory. More than at any other time, the BBC was part of, and seen to be part of, the history of the nation.

### **'The people will break'**

When war was declared in 1939 most people expected a cataclysm. Pre-war pessimism about popular morale had largely been forgotten, yet it had been common to many groups who were otherwise opposed to each other.

During the 1930s another war was felt to be imminent. The main aim of many politicians was to avert the repetition of a disaster like that of the First World War. Even pacifists organizing peace pledges came to feel, like Vera Brittain, that they were trying 'Canute-like to reverse the inexorable'. Indeed memories of the First World War dominated the British as they entered the Second.

The success of the fascist dictatorships had led to a growing distrust and fatalism about the political will of the 'masses'. J. A. Hobson argued in the left-wing *Political Quarterly*:

No one could have predicted the possibility of the collapse of all codes of decent conduct, all standards of justice, truth, and honour, not only in international affairs but in the revealed nationalism of the brutalitarian state, the facile acquiescence of whole peoples in the absolute domination of self-appointed masters, and the amazing credulity of the educated classes under the spells of the crudest propaganda. (January 1938)

Many on the left believed that the organization of the resistance to fascism would lead to totalitarianism at home. 'If you go to war to save democracy', Kingsley Martin wrote in the *New Statesman* (1 September 1939), 'you will give up democracy in doing so, and find that you are fighting for the overseas investment of your own capitalist classes.' Even after the outbreak of war Sir Charles Trevelyan, a former Labour Minister of Education, wrote privately, 'I have a deep-seated feeling that none of the people want to fight, and that the war will collapse.' It was thus felt by some on the left either that the workers would refuse to fight a war against fascism abroad, because it would only lead to fascism at home, or that they would not fight anyway, because of the iniquitous lack of justice in Britain.

The marches and demonstrations of the 1930s had led the right to believe that British workers were too anarchistic and socialist to be trusted to fight. Those in authority were also anxious about the effects of class division on morale. As early as 1926 a pioneering social scientist, Lasswell, had written, 'Governments of Western Europe can never be perfectly certain that a class-conscious proletariat will rally to the clarion of war.'

Indeed the whole concept of 'public morale', which so preoccupied the government during the war, originated in the 1930s. It was a concept based on naïve psychological and sociological assumptions; in particular, that individuals' attitudes and behaviour were peculiarly susceptible to manipulation in the conditions of modern 'mass' society. 'Morale' was seen as single and malleable. The success of the fascist dictators had confirmed these views, and demonstrated that the urban masses acted in response to crowd psychology and not according to rational political calculation. One reason for this view of the masses, as Bruntz indicated, was the widespread belief that superior allied propaganda had helped to shorten the First World War. *The Times* in 1918 had argued that effective propaganda had hastened victory by a year, and consequently saved a million lives. Indeed, as Shils pointed out, the Nazis may have overestimated the effect of propaganda because they concluded that 'If Germans failed to be tricked by propaganda this time, success was assured.' In addition, the decades between the two wars had seen the dramatic success of commercial propaganda in advertising. The people, then, were thought to be persuadable.

Parallel to this anxiety was the belief that the new technology of destruction, the bombing attack on cities, would lead to a collapse of civilian society. These fears were based on exaggerated projections of the number of deaths which could be expected for each ton of explosives dropped, and on the biased intuitions of military 'experts' about how civilian

populations would respond to bombing. 'In simple terms', Titmuss wrote, 'the experts foretold a mass outbreak of hysterical neurosis among the civilian population.' Psychoanalysts argued that under the strain of bombing, people would 'regress', and behave like frightened and unsatisfied children. A group of eminent psychologists reported to the government that 'The utter helplessness of the urban civilian today when confronted with the simplest task outside his ordinary work is likely to be a potent factor . . . in the war effort.' Experts confidently predicted that for every survivor injured by bombs at least three others would be driven mad.

It was therefore widely believed that the British worker would be devastated by an attack from the air. Perhaps this fear explains the curious official ambivalence about the approaching war during the late 1930s. Detailed preparations were made for war, yet rearmers were still banned from the microphone. An atmosphere of dignity, gloom, and appeasement dominated broadcasting even after the declaration of war. Harmon Grisewood recalled that at the end of September 1939 the new Director General, Ogilvie, suggested that a lady cellist, playing a duet with a nightingale in a wood, should be broadcast to Germany. Ogilvie believed that the sound would induce peaceful and harmonious thoughts in the belligerent fascists.

### **The first months of war**

When the war started normal programmes were replaced by news bulletins interspersed with serious and appropriate music. 'Almost everything is obscured at present,' the *New Statesman* commented on 9 September. 'For the first days of the war the BBC monotonously repeated news which was in the morning papers and which it had itself repeated an hour earlier. While each edition of the papers repeated what had already been heard on the wireless.' The news black-out was as complete as the black-out of the streets. During the phoney war the BBC paid for nominal independence by doing exactly what the government wanted. Jack Payne noted that the music department was 'deep in memos', one of which listed the eighty banned German and Italian composers, including Monteverdi, who had died in 1643. Another BBC employee claimed that the only explanation for the failure of the Germans to devastate Bush House was that 'no BBC administrator had remembered to send Hitler the memo reminding him to have it done'.<sup>1</sup>

When more varied programmes started from new provincial centres in unlikely country houses, they were rather less well-organised versions of what had gone on before. Basil Deane, who ran the Entertainment National Service Association (ENSA), the organization responsible for the entertainment of the troops, wrote, 'Public anxiety was not lessened by the forced gaiety of variety artists whose personal jokes and excessive use of each other's Christian names – syndicated familiarity – savoured of self-advancement and was out of key with the national mood.' Many early propaganda broadcasts had a peevish, hectoring tone. A

month after the outbreak of war a British Institute of Public Opinion poll showed that 35 per cent of the public were dissatisfied with the BBC and 10 per cent did not listen to it. In the winter of 1939 to 1940 Mass Observation reported that rumours were rife; the people apparently did not believe the newspapers, the Ministry of Information, or the BBC. They trusted only their friends.

The 'phoney war' forced the BBC to regionalize and extemporize. The most important change was the Corporation's dramatic growth in size. In 1939 the BBC had 4,000 staff, by the beginning of 1940 6,000, and by November of that year nearly 11,000. Roger Eckersley, the staid brother of Peter Eckersley, wrote, 'I knew directly or indirectly most of the senior staff up to the outbreak of war. Now, I shared lifts with complete strangers.' It became increasingly difficult to control the hordes of new staff and this in itself led to a period of anarchy and change. The new employees were quite different from the regular Corporation men. George Orwell broadcast to the colonies and India, William Empson to China, Herbert Read organized poetry readings, Edward Blunden arranged talks, and Basil Wright and Humphrey Jennings made programmes on the principles of documentary. According to Orwell:

The British Government started the present war with the more or less openly declared intention of keeping the literary intelligentsia out of it, yet after three years almost every writer, however undesirable his political history or opinions, had been sucked into the various ministries or the BBC. . . . No one acquainted with Government pamphlets, the Army Bureau of Current Affairs lectures, documentary films and broadcasts to occupied countries . . . can believe that our rulers would sponsor this kind of thing if they could help it.

The notion of a Corporation converted from philistine reaction to progressive culture became part of the fable of the BBC at war. It was a particularly public example of a common tension that characterized much war work. Conservative administrative authorities were forced to work with creative intellectuals. Scientific 'boffins' invented curious bombs for the military; literary and artistic 'boffins' did intelligence work. The Ministry of Information was notorious for the strange collection of dilettantes, anthropologists, and advertising copy writers which it employed. Duff Cooper, who directed the ministry, wrote that a monster had been created, 'so large, so voluminous, so amorphous, that no single man could cope with it'.<sup>2</sup> 'Frustrated' was the word he came to hate most: the plaintive cry of brilliant amateurs thwarted by bureaucracy. Yet the intellectuals were more prepared to take risks as they had no careers to jeopardize. The *Radio Times* became filled with pictures of distinguished chemists putting bicycle power to strange purposes, and professors of literature 'thinking' about future programmes; the image of 'boffin' at least provided an accommodation and role for experts.

For a brief period it was respectable, and even useful, to be serious. Nevertheless the BBC, wrote Orwell, felt 'halfway between a girls' school and a lunatic asylum'.

### Programme changes

The first radio personality of the war was not a patriotic politician or a staunch common man, but Lord Haw Haw. By 1940 William Joyce dominated German propaganda to England. His voice was rich, apparently upper class, 'Cholmondely-Plantagenet out of Christ Church',<sup>3</sup> and caused much speculation. It was difficult to avoid Joyce's wavelength when tuning into British stations, as Rebecca West recalled. 'There was an arresting quality about his voice which made it a sacrifice not to go on listening.'

Everyone in Gosport knew that Haw Haw knew that their town hall clock was two minutes slow. In Oxford everyone knew when the Germans were going to bomb the Morris works; Lord Haw Haw had told them. The myth of the English aristocrat with inside knowledge of the German High Command – a kind of diabolical Peter Wimsey – was powerful. What Lord Haw Haw said was less important than what the British came to believe he had said.

It has been argued that Haw Haw was ineptly used by the Germans, who failed to keep him adequately informed about military developments. However, both the government and the BBC were seriously worried about the broadcasts. Robert Silvey of the Audience Research Department was commissioned to conduct a survey of Joyce listeners for the BBC. 'It produced highly reassuring results,' he wrote in the BBC *Handbook*. 'It showed that the British welcomed the new guest to the fireside as a diverting entertainment in the first bleak wartime winter.' But the survey included some less comfortable findings: by the end of 1939 over 30 per cent of the population was listening to Joyce regularly. The BBC's Home Broadcasting Board had sneered that only 'adolescents, and middle-aged women' listened to him. Silvey's work revealed that every kind of person heard the programmes. The reassuring feature of the audience, little understood at the time, was that Haw Haw's listeners were particularly discriminating ones. Most read one or more newspapers; 34 per cent of the listeners were *Times* readers. Those most exposed to enemy propaganda were those least likely to be taken in by it. Yet Joyce's ability to hold an audience demonstrated either that the BBC was failing to entertain or that its news was distrusted.

The fall of France in 1940 demonstrated the potential power of enemy propaganda. It was widely believed that German broadcasts were responsible for the failure of the French civilians to resist the German invasion, and for the strength of the French 'fifth column' of collaborators. British officials felt that radio was crucial, yet the BBC was too solemn, aloof, and boring. The problem was urgent.

### **1940 and cheerful patriotism**

Dunkirk has been seen by most historians as a key turning point in the war. A massive defeat was turned into triumph, and the British, curiously relieved to be without allies, found a new determination to win the war. Calder sees Dunkirk as the point at which the 'old gang' of pre-war reactionaries was finally exposed. Found to be guilty they were thrown aside. After Dunkirk, he argues, people were concerned with winning the war, and ensuring a 'New Deal' for the peace. Mass Observation noted a steady growth of left-wing opinion from this period.

What is remarkable is the absence of any evidence of popular pressure for a negotiated peace. Rationally invasion seemed certain, and defeat, accompanied by appalling devastation, seemed likely. Yet where, during the 'phony war' period, there had been a degree of indifference, now there was a closing of ranks. It was not that morale was high, nor that anybody believed Britain was likely to win the war: rather the war was accepted. The public decided to try and survive it as best it could.

Broadcasting contributed to this shift in mood. It ceased to be merely exhortative. It became more sensitive to popular feeling and, in consequence, more successful in moulding or at least channelling public opinion.

Dunkirk meant that the war changed from being an affair of soldiers abroad to one of civilians at home. It was quickly followed by the Battle of Britain and then the blitz. The kind of war that people had expected had arrived. Yet, though devastating, the catastrophic effects widely predicted in the 1930s did not occur. Survivors went on with what Churchill called 'their job of living through the blitz'. Even Mass Observation, which documented the panic and virtual disintegration of civilian life in the worst hit towns at some times during the winter, noted the remarkable capacity of the public to adapt to new conditions. In London, Tom Harrison wrote, 'the unflinching regularity' of German attacks 'greatly raised the ability to adjust, and created the best organized centre in the country'.

The First World War was traumatic partly because the horror of a large-scale modern conflict had been far greater than anybody had ever imagined. The Second World War – especially on the civilian front – was bearable precisely because literature, memory, and rhetoric had led everybody to expect a repetition. Yet civilians in cities, like men in trenches, were prisoners. In the First World War the troops called trenches on the Western front by familiar names, Piccadilly, Liverpool Street, Elephant and Castle, Penny Lane. In 1940 it was the real places in Britain which suffered. They could not escape. There were civilian front and relief lines. In the First World War men would be regularly moved back from the front to security behind the lines. In the Second World War (as Titmuss argued) the underprivileged survived the stress of attack partly because there was a variety of 'safety valves' they could use. The government never stopped the nightly 'trekking' out of the city centres, nor did it resist the take-over of tube stations as deep shelters. On any one night of the blitz seven out of



ten Londoners slept in their beds. But in any single week during the blitz nearly everyone spent at least a night in the shelters or the equivalent. Civilians thus survived the stress partly because – like the soldiers in the First World War – they took some relief from the front.

The prevailing atmosphere in 1940 amongst the civilian ranks was, as in the 1914 army, one of ‘us’ against ‘them’. The opposition was as much to the unbelievable bureaucracy of British administration, as to the Nazis themselves. Strachey expressed this mood when he wrote:

There is no public record of the labour of the interdepartmental committee, of the co-ordinating committee, the Board of Enquiry, or of the Treasury minute, or indeed of the final Cabinet minute which settled upon the word ‘incident’ as the designation of what takes place when a bomb falls on a street.

One way of dealing with the Second World War was to refer firmly to the First. Like many of his listeners the broadcaster J. B. Priestley’s own image of fighting was based on memories of 1914–18, and he particularly liked to draw parallels between trench life in the First World War and civilian mores in this one.

In his memoirs, Priestley referred to a folksong of the Great War:

‘It’s hanging on the old barbed wire  
I’ve seen ‘em, I’ve seen ‘em.’  
. . . [E]ven the devilish enemy, that death-trap the wire, has somehow been accepted, recognized, acknowledged, almost with affection.

A similar point about public attitudes in the Second World War was made by John Strachey:

No the people didn’t call Germans Huns . . . or dirty bastards. No one knows in what region of the unconscious the English people decided that their formidable enemy were best called Jerry. . . . There is in it an acceptance of destiny; of a destiny to resist. There is a refusal to take the panoply of the German might at its own evaluation.

Both writers are pointing to an attitude of familiarity, though not of contempt, for the enemy. This had first developed amongst soldiers in the proximity of the trenches. In the First World War it had separated them both from those who lived in the security of high commands, and from everyone in the safety of home. In the Second, such irony was an appropriate attitude for civilians’ nightly encounters with bombers.

To what extent did the BBC lead, follow, or play a part in the creation of a new rhetoric to handle the experience of being bombed nightly?

The war brought the blue joke and an anarchistic, almost surreal, assault on authority to the radio. Shows like ITMA (It's That Man Again) never challenged the basis of authority, rather they consolidated it by making a joke of its misuse. In the 1930s radio comics had been warned that there were to be 'no gags on Scotsmen, Welshmen, clergymen, drink or medical matters'. ITMA thrived on innuendo, and on a skilful nudging at the previously taboo.

The programme was based on a formula. It had a repertoire of characters with stock phrases. Funf, 'the enemy agent with the feet of sauerkraut', made a joke of the spy panic of 1940. This is Funf speaking,' he would intone muffled by a glass. 'After you Claude – No, after you Cyril,' RAF pilots would quip as they queued to begin the attack, using another ITMA catchphrase. Each programme had eighteen-and-a-half minutes of talk into which an attempt was made to pack 'at least one hundred laughs'.<sup>4</sup>

A great strength of the show was its topicality. The writers visited factories and army camps to pick up current slang. The programme would be rewritten up to the hour before it was broadcast in order to include jokes on the latest news. ITMA summed up public frustration and gave it vent. In an early show transmitted from Bush House, itself next door to the Ministry of Works, Tommy Handley issued a memo. 'To all concerned in the Office of Twerps. Take notice that from today, September the twenty-fourth, I the Minister of Aggravation, have power to confiscate, complicate and commandeer.' In 1940 there was a period of remorseless exhortation of the public by the government. Frank Owen noted in the literary magazine, *Horizon*, that he was obliged to pass thirty-seven government posters on the way from his house to the Post Office. The Ministry of Food was particularly active in impressing on the public the virtues of the carrot. An ITMA sketch took note:

*Door opens.* Voice: Do you know what you can do with a carrot?

Tommy Handley: Yer.

*Door closes.*

Frank Worsley, the producer, thought that the humour of ITMA was 'the closest radio had come to the everyday jokes that ordinary people have always made. . . . The characters were not trying to be funny in themselves, they were only funny in relation to the situation.'

One of the show's most popular characters was 'Mrs Mopp, the vamping vassal with the tousled tassel', a charlady who worked for a pompous civic dignitary. 'Can I do you now sir?' she would ask. Mrs Mopp was perhaps the most famous version of a familiar figure of the period. She glares at German bombers during an attack in an *Express* cartoon by Giles (20 November 1940). 'Never mind about it not being arf wot we're giving them – lets git 'ome,'

demands her husband. The same figure – phlegmatic and grumpily imperturbable – was dug out of ruins. She was a mythical figure, and real people were frequently credited with her well-known characteristics. ‘Mrs Wells is an obstinate woman,’ John Strachey wrote about one lady who survived an air raid. ‘You may drop big bombs on her, you may kill her dearly loved husband before her eyes, you may bury herself and her daughter under her home: but you do not alter her.’ People who signed themselves ‘Mrs Mopp’ sent letters to the *Listener* and the *Radio Times*; she was discussed in the *New Statesman* and she asked the Brains Trust questions.

Mrs Mopp was an image of the working-class woman at war. Her characteristics were an indefatigable appetite for work, and stubbornness. She did not mean to be heroic, but simply to get on with things. Titmuss saw her in ‘a certain Mrs B., a beetrootseller by trade’, who brings order and comfort to a shelter in Islington but who returns daily to her stall.

When ‘charladies’ had first been mentioned in a broadcast in 1938 by John Hilton, the programme received hundreds of letters correcting his language. He should have called them ‘charwomen’ for, wrote the aggrieved listeners, they were hardly ladies.<sup>5</sup> By 1942 charladies were featuring regularly in BBC programmes – recognition of a kind of the importance and power of working-class women. ‘Kitchen front’ programmes were broadcast ‘for the busy working woman – the charlady’. ‘Mrs Mopp’, said Priestley on the radio, ‘could easily believe there weren’t any women in Germany . . . just tramping, bragging, swaggering males, silly little boys.’ ‘When I think of the country now,’ said another speaker on the Home Service at the height of the blitz (*Listener*, 9 September 1941), ‘I see representing the country an embattled Mrs Mopp shaking her fist at the sky. “I’ll do yer,” she says, “I’ll do yer”.’

The other woman the BBC gave the nation was ‘the girl next door’, Vera Lynn. She sang sweet but not sexy songs. The typical ‘crooning’ style implied an intimate relationship between the singer and her listener. This was hardly appropriate, and possibly embarrassing, to the communal listeners of the Forces Programme. Vera Lynn was the solution. A Vera Lynn song was a cross between a hymn and a pub song.

Yet nostalgia and sentiment were not thought by the BBC to be proper fare for fighting men. ‘Why should we hear so much from Vera Lynn?’ Deputy Director Graves wrote angrily. ‘How can men fit themselves for battle with these debilitating tunes in their ears?’ The BBC Board of Governors remarked testily, ‘Sincerely Yours deplored – but popularity noted’.<sup>6</sup> Military authorities demanded something more martial, yet the show survived, simply because it had such a vast and enthusiastic audience. ‘The girl next door’ was loyal, sincere, faithful, ordinary, and unsophisticated. She was ‘the mainstay of most war fiction’, Tom Harrison noted in a review of war literature written in *Horizon* (December 1941) and was the heroine of a number of films.

### ‘The people are changing’

According to contemporary commentators, the war made the public more serious-minded. This view has been accepted by later historians. Perhaps it should be qualified. Robert Silvey certainly felt in 1946 that there was no evidence that public taste had ‘deepened’. Val Gielgud, Director of Drama during the war, recalls that when a 1940 production of *Hamlet* was interrupted at the grave scene, the BBC was inundated with letters from people who wanted to know what happened next. Yet there was undoubtedly a shift in interest. The public appetite for news broadcasts became insatiable. Less predictably, the audiences for serious music increased sharply, and drama ratings doubled between 1939 and 1941. At the start of hostilities the BBC had assumed that the people would be ‘too tired for much heavy stuff’, and in too sombre a mood to appreciate variety. Both assumptions were revealing – and both proved wrong.

It was generally believed that the masses were becoming more informed, and the success of programmes like the Brains Trust was seen as evidence of this. ‘One of the surprises of wartime radio’, wrote Howard Thomas, the programme’s producer, ‘is that five men discussing philosophy, art and science, should have a regular audience of ten million listeners.’ As many people listened to the Brains Trust as to the most popular variety shows. Such was the influence of current affairs and discussion broadcasting that the Brains Trust formula replaced orthodox debating in innumerable social clubs and societies. It was particularly popular with local Conservative Associations.

The Brains Trust panel consisted of three regular members and two visiting guests. The original trio were Julian Huxley, the scientist, the philosopher Joad, and Commander Campbell, a retired soldier. In retrospect Campbell seems like a character from Evelyn Waugh, or perhaps Captain W. E. Johns – an enjoyable overdrawn caricature with a background of exotic experience: he claimed to be able to sleep with his eyes open, to have solved the mystery of the *Marie Celeste*, to have seen and smelt sea serpents, and to have ‘married’ a South Sea Island girl by eating some fish with her.

Brains Trust questions were wide-ranging. ‘Why should we learn algebra?’ asked a class of Manchester schoolgirls. ‘Why can you tickle other people but not yourself?’ asked a bus conductor. ‘What is hate?’ enquired a schoolmistress. A group of RAF pilots who asked why flies could land on ceilings started a dispute which lasted months. To be mentioned on the Brains Trust was fame indeed. A week after *War and Peace* had been recommended by the panel it had gone out of print. This kind of impact was hard to ignore. In 1941 the Ministry of Food was exhorting women to make the new, economical, soya ‘Joad in the Hole’.

The importance of the show was recognized by Whitehall in other ways. There was concern about the programme straying into delicate political areas, highlighted by the fact

that Joad and Huxley were socialists. In 1942 questions on religion were banned because the churches complained that the programme had an agnostic bias. In 1943 the government banned the discussion of politics, and MPs were excluded from the panel. When Huxley attacked patent medicines and called for a National Health Service the Tories complained. After a period of increasing restriction the original panel were forbidden to appear together. From 1943 each was allowed to broadcast only one programme in three.

The Brains Trust was somewhere between a culture and an institution. Like other programmes it provided a new currency of conversation. Women in shelters discussed Campbell's views on hypnosis. (He claimed it could be beneficial: 'I knew a man who put his wife to sleep with it at weekends.') In 1940 the *Listener* reported that Gilbert Murray's jokes were swapped in bus queues. 'Veni, Vidi, Vichy,' he had said. 'I came, I saw, I concurred.'

The success of the Brains Trust was the basis for many theories about public opinion during the war: left-wingers felt that a population interested in the panel's views on social justice would also be susceptible to socialism. Whether or not this was right, the programme presented to the listener an image of himself as engaged, participant, and capable of confounding experts. Perhaps the real significance of the Brains Trust was that it represented a shift not just in public attitudes, but in the Corporation's willingness to cater for them. Despite restrictions and political interference the Trust provided for and encouraged an immense public curiosity about the natural world, the world of affairs, and about questions of ethics, philosophy, and psychology, and in so doing it began to foster a less aloof and distant image of the Corporation.

Yet the most dramatic image of the radio at war is of families clustered around their sets listening with reverence to speeches by Churchill, the news, or J.B. Priestley's Sunday night talks. These commanded some of the largest audiences ever known. 'By 1941 over 50 per cent of the adult population listened to them,' reported Silvey. It is therefore worth considering them closely.

Before the war the BBC had rarely allowed Churchill to broadcast. The Corporation even censored him after the war had begun. He was considered too anti-German. Churchill had come to hate the BBC. Yet his speeches as Prime Minister, always delivered first to parliament, were perhaps the most dramatic events of wartime broadcasting. He claimed that he merely gave words to what people felt: 'The people's will was resolute and remorseless, I only expressed it, I had the luck to be called upon to give the roar.' Churchill believed that military success, rather than propaganda, was the only way to win a war. 'If words could kill,' he broadcast in 1939, 'we would all be dead already.' Despite his claim to the contrary, Churchill was of course an expert propagandist, and the government, whatever it said in public, remained desperately concerned with the public mood throughout the war.

If Churchill expressed confidence in the people, J. B. Priestley claimed to represent them. His first series of 'Postscripts' started after Dunkirk at the peak listening time after the Sunday evening news. The series turned him into a household name. 'I found myself, he wrote, 'tied like a man to a gigantic balloon – to one of those bogus reputations that only the media know how to inflate.'

Churchill combined an appreciation of practical problems with a deep, almost metaphysical romanticism, based on an appeal to honour, national pride, and a sense of history. Priestley was just as practical but looked to the future. He helped to give the war an aim beyond military victory by focusing attention on the world to be built in the aftermath. Priestley talked about a level of society with which Churchill had had little contact and of which he understood less. While Churchill talked of Henry V and quoted Macaulay, Priestley's examples were Falstaff and Sam Weller.

Priestley's success, however, had essentially the same foundation as that of Churchill. It was based on an appeal to traditional values; indeed, on an appeal to a traditional social order. Priestley's Postscripts make a virtue of getting on with the job in hand, even when there were no alternatives. Like Churchill, Priestley linked current events with the past. He reminded listeners after Dunkirk of Hardy's descriptions of the Napoleonic wars, and described it as another English epic. 'So typical of us, so absurd, yet so grand and gallant that you hardly know whether to laugh or cry.' Official propaganda, Priestley claimed, encouraged people to see the war as an interruption. It was, he said, rather 'a chapter in a tremendous history'.

Postscripts continually emphasized the rural nature of Britain. In the First World War officers read *The Field and Country Life* in the trenches, and war poets contrasted the seasons and images of nature with the war. Priestley, broadcasting to the most urbanized population in the world, referred in ten out of his seventeen talks to the country and nature. 'I don't think that there has ever been a lovelier English spring than this last one', he said at the start of the Battle of Britain, 'now melting into full summer.' Later, after the news that the British had been obliged to sink the French fleet, he started the broadcast by saying that he had seen two heartening things that week. 'The first was a duck and the second was a dig in the ribs.' The duck swimming with her ducklings, 'triumphant little parcels of light', was in a country pond; the dig in the ribs was given by Churchill to Bevin in parliament before the grim announcement. Priestley talked about factories and the blitz, British restaurants and London humour, but the village or the Welsh hills were more frequently the setting for his talks. Priestley provided his listeners with a way of handling their experiences. 'I don't like danger', he said in November 1940, when Londoners were facing their twenty-eighth consecutive night of bombing, 'but the fact that we are all at least within reach of danger seems to me a better, not a worse, feature of the war.' In the First World War men in the trenches, and the writers who recorded their lives, had survived its horrors by rejecting romantic heroism. In the Second, Priestley made the everyday and commonplace heroic.

Priestley demanded 'more flags and less red tape, hard work and high jinks'. He challenged the old order and called for more social justice. Like Ed Murrow later, he praised the courage of individuals and criticized their leaders for ineptitude. In his second series of Postscripts he proposed to talk about money, class, and equality. 'I received', he wrote, 'two letters.' One was from the Ministry of Information, telling him 'that the BBC was responsible for the decision to take me off the air'. The other was from the BBC saying 'that a directive had come from the Ministry of Information to end my broadcasting'. They were both anxious to make it clear that 'the order to shut me up had come from elsewhere'. The Minister of Information, Brendan Bracken, had seen Priestley earlier and warned him to say more about Dickens and less about the government. As with the Brains Trust there had been complaints in parliament about Priestley's socialism. Churchill felt it intolerable that the BBC should broadcast criticism of the government, and ordered Priestley to be gagged. Already, within the Corporation, the Controller of Talks had written to Ryan, the Controller of News:

Priestley has definite social and political views which he puts over in his broadcasts. . . . The question which I want to raise is one of principle, whether any single person should be given the opportunity of acquiring such influence . . . merely on the grounds of his merits as a broadcaster, which are, of course, very great.<sup>7</sup>

Priestley's removal was widely greeted as a sign of government censorship. The *New Statesman* printed a selection of the letters of protest, 'representative of the many others we have received'. Even the *Radio Times* printed letters of complaint for several weeks.

The removal of Priestley showed how limited was the official concern for reform. Priestley's programmes proposed different priorities from the war aims laid down by Churchill. To talk of new orders and redistribution was, in the view of the government, merely to distract the public from the urgent business of winning the war. Yet it was at precisely this point in the war that even the officials in the Ministry of Information were beginning to urge the government to plan post-war reconstruction. The public, they argued, needed the prospect of a better future to enable them to cope with the rigorous present. Priestley had merely started the shift in propaganda a little early. Later it was to be taken up with growing enthusiasm by the government itself.

Harold Nicolson dismissed the talks as 'sentimental banalities'. Priestley himself was puzzled by their success. Subsequently they have been seen as a major contribution to a change in public mood. Yet the most notable feature of Priestley's talks was that a concern for ordinary people and their future emerged and was expressed by very traditional images of rural England, village communities, and nature. This was hardly the rhetoric of a revolutionary.

## **The news**

The most important wartime programme was the news. Information about the conduct of the war was the main determinant of morale on the Home Front. Indeed the BBC's claim to accuracy and objectivity was, in itself, a propaganda weapon – a demonstration of the superiority of democracy over totalitarianism. This was particularly true because the BBC – much more than the press – was the 'voice of Britain'. Unlike newspapers, its messages reached a wide foreign audience in neutral and occupied countries. Broadcast news also seemed to be an authoritative reflection of official policy and opinion. There were allegations on the left that the real facts of the situation were kept from the people; these were particularly relevant during the period of the 'phoney war' when many on the left expected imminent defeat. The Service Ministries, on the other hand, viewed radio news with suspicion for a different reason: they saw it as a threat to morale.

News, like everything else for the duration, was determined by the necessity of winning the war. The Corporation's sense of priorities was often very close to that of the government. There was narrow-minded and bigoted censorship. But some of the omissions which the BBC was later blamed for were more a result of the contemporary understanding of what could be done in the war, than of deliberate suppression. Thus, for example, the BBC did not so much fail to inform the public about the holocaust – indeed what it knew it told – rather this news was not given a prominent position, and there was little consideration of what might be done to save the remaining Jews. This was largely because the BBC accepted the government's views that the allied victory was the only 'realistic' condition for effective action.<sup>8</sup>

However, such was the demand for news that when little of the real thing was available because of military inactivity, the public created its own. Rumours acquired a special influence. The Ministry of Information waged a relentless and unsuccessful campaign against them. Mass Observation divided them into three categories: impressive, informative, and inhibited.<sup>9</sup> The first were a compensation for non-involvement in the war; the second were based on an attempt to improve the teller's prestige, and the third kind, the inquiry claimed, were based on fear. Mass Observation argued that rumours arose from a general distrust of published and broadcast sources, and so were a product of official censorship. But they may also have been a simple reflection of anxiety, a context in which to talk about the war. The BBC always argued that rumours could be stopped only by more comprehensive news.

Several departments contended for the right to control the BBC. Even more believed that they deserved it. The Ministry of Information was concerned to encourage morale at home; the Political Intelligence Department to scavenge information from abroad; the Foreign Office to maintain friendly relations with allies and neutral countries; while the Ministry of



Economic Warfare was interested in the immediate effects on the enemy's industry and morale, even if this involved ignoring the interests of the neutrals.

At the start of the war an official wrote that the Ministry of Information 'recognized that for the purpose of war activities the BBC is to be regarded as a Government Department'. (He added: 'I wouldn't put it quite like this in any public statement.'<sup>10</sup>) This implies a rather different relationship between broadcasting and the government than that which the BBC claimed. Yet the control by the ministries was often irregular and contradictory. For a time even the BBC's Director Generalship was divided: one Director to say yes to the ministry (broadcasters joked) and the other to say no to the staff.<sup>11</sup>

The Ministry of Information, which had most direct control over broadcasts, had been the butt of much humour when it was formed: the inefficiency of its organization seemed to be surpassed only by the scale of its notional operation. It was believed to be staffed by brilliant but dotty amateurs. Nigel Riley (who resigned from the ministry) pointed out that in 1940 of 999 ministry employees only 47 were journalists. The ministry was supposed to build morale, yet until 1941 it based its judgements on little except hunches and intuition. Stories about the department's gentlemanly eccentricities were legion. One incident involved a ministry official dispatched to lecture in the provinces on the wickedness of gossip. Complaints came back that his speech had been almost entirely composed of long quotations in Latin. 'Oh', replied the department, 'Latin? It's usually Greek with him.'

Reith, who was appointed Minister of the Department in 1940, was deeply depressed by its pointlessness and disorganization. Nevertheless, before Churchill dismissed him later in the same year, he had begun to define the work of the ministry and to discipline its staff. Reith believed that it was essential to have news and propaganda controlled by the same authority. By the end of the war, Ian Maclaine has argued, the ministry was actively defending the press and broadcasting from the Service Ministries.

### **Broadcasting and the press**

Which did people believe more, the newspapers or broadcasting? Intellectuals certainly did not trust the Corporation. They recalled its role during the General Strike. 'What could possibly take the place of newspapers?' wrote the editor of the *Picture Post* (18 December 1940). 'There surely cannot be any sane man or woman who would argue that the Ministry of Information, or its near relation the BBC, have so far offered a serious alternative to the newspapers in conveying information?' Yet there were also grounds for distrusting the press. Newspapers had deceived the public in the interest of the Establishment over the abdication crisis.

The war heightened a long-standing rivalry between press and radio. The *Listener* was voicing a widely held BBC view in 1941 when it claimed that while radio was concerned to report events as they occurred, news in the press was regarded as entertainment. A Home Service talk in March 1941 maintained that newspaper stories might have come ‘from a report from a Mexican correspondent of a Portuguese journal quoted in a Roman paper’. The public had little idea of the tricks employed by the press in presenting events.

Mass Observation reported that radio was the most important medium of information in 1941, and that by the end of the war it had replaced the newspapers for some kinds of news, particularly immediate accounts of battles.<sup>12</sup> When more systematic surveys asked people to rank the media on which they based their opinions, radio came far below personal experience and several points below newspapers. Yet between January 1940 and the end of the war in Europe the authority of the press fell steadily, from third to sixth place in people’s ranking. In contrast the position of broadcasting remained constant throughout this period between fifth and sixth place.<sup>13</sup> By the end of the war people had come to trust broadcasting more – at least in comparison with other sources of information.

### Topicality and the BBC

The Second World War made topicality the dominant news value. German scoops had shocked the public and done much to discredit the Corporation at the start of the war. Topicality then became the key weapon in the BBC’s defence against the expansionist censorship of the Service Ministries. The Ministry of Information recognized the importance of getting news on the air as quickly as possible. A memorandum ordered ‘Action to strengthen confidence in BBC news. Confirmed items to be included in earliest available bulletins, even at the expense of friction with the Press.’<sup>14</sup>

From 1939 the BBC’s news section grew rapidly, gathering material from an increasingly wide range of sources, including monitoring foreign broadcast sections. The BBC also developed the ultimately ‘topical’ news, the ‘on the spot’ or ‘outside’ broadcast. By late 1944 teams of broadcasters were regularly accompanying British units both in France and the Far East. Commentators developed a way of reporting conditions at the front which related the soldiers’ experience more closely to their families at home. ‘If you’ve got a brother or a husband or a sweetheart in Normandy today,’ started one famous report from the war zone in 1944, ‘there’s a fair chance you might see your name riding along the dusty roads, your name on a truck, on a lorry, on a bulldozer, on a tank, somewhere in France.’ The style of war reporting was also closely modelled on an earlier form of outside broadcasting: sports programmes. A reporter describing a bombing raid on Hamburg was angrily compared by a *Radio Times* correspondent (30 September 1944) to ‘someone at a Welsh Rugby International – not a person watching death and destruction’.

The war led to a victory for those who believed in the superiority of the scientific assessment of public opinion. At the start of the war the government believed that this could be tested by consulting pressure groups and opinion leaders. By the end of the war the public was being polled, probed, and tested by a multitude of official surveys. These new sources of information made it clear that in everyday matters of which the public had experience, it was essential that news should be given quickly and accurately. If people had been bombed out of their homes and their towns devastated, it was imperative that the BBC should be able to say so. Knowledge of the extent of destruction was an important factor in coming to terms with it. At the start of the blitz Maurice Gorham had written, 'The news sounded all the more alarming for being so vague.' But by November 1940, although scrupulously censored for information which might be useful to the Germans, it had become more precise. In Britain, at least, 'topicality' became the dominant news value as a consequence of the war.

### **The 'manner' of the news**

Before the war the BBC's announcers had been anonymous: this was felt to be more dignified. However, from the start of the war they were named, and this innovation excited considerable comment at the time. The change was introduced in order that, in the case of invasion, the public would not be taken in by orders issued by the enemy. After the war it was discovered that the Germans had carefully trained substitute announcers to sound like Alvar Lidell and Stuart Hibberd to be used during the proposed invasion of England. However, the BBC maintained some pre-war standards. The announcers, despite sleeping in a lavatory adjoining the studio, and living for days underground, continued to present the news in dress suits. When the BBC received a direct hit which made an audible thump in the middle of a bulletin, the announcer paused, a whispered 'Are you all right?' was heard, and then he continued, with Corporation-bred aplomb, to read the news without comment.

Before 1939 style had often seemed more important than comprehensibility in BBC news broadcasting; during the war ease of understanding became paramount. There was a new anxiety about syntax and vocabulary, and scripts were scrutinized for difficult words and constructions. The Corporation also became more sensitive about the voices of its news-readers. Clement Attlee, Deputy Prime Minister as well as leader of the Labour Party, complained that the monopoly of upper-class voices was likely to offend workers. Indeed this anxiety was shared, and a Home Morale Emergency Committee in the Ministry of Information suggested that 'something might be done to diminish the present predominance of the cultured voice upon the wireless. Every effort should be made to bring working-class people to the microphone.'

The Corporation responded by employing Wilfred Pickles, whose voice combined the properties of being both working class and northern. Broadcasting had developed a unique pitch of speech in the 1930s and 1940s, a high and hard voice. One news-reader, Joseph Macleod, wrote that he had two voices. One was low, gruff, and Scottish. The other, which he always used when broadcasting, was 'young, suave, rather pedantic and intolerant, a voice in a higher register'. The war also made the tone of voice a more sensitive matter than before. Macleod lost his job, ostensibly because his style of announcing was too 'tendentious'. He was accused of putting too much emphasis on certain words, and apparently sneering at the government. He was dismissed, according to Harold Nicolson, soon after Bracken had 'spoken openly about the left-wing fanaticism of certain members of the BBC, especially in the news room'. Clearly the tone of an announcement could establish the public attitude towards the news. One news-reader wrote of the problems posed, for example, by announcing the suicide of the Commander of the *Graf Spee* after the ship had been lost. If the announcer sounded pleased the item 'would sound gloating. While if he sounded sympathetic it would sound fifth column.' The BBC's solution to this problem was that announcers should sound as 'official, neutral, and unaffected as possible'. The BBC announcer, it had been decided, should sound like a civil servant.

Another, more urgent, reason why announcers became so careful of their words and their timing was the problem of the sarcastic comments which German broadcasters had at first managed to slip in during pauses in bulletins. The only way to stop this was to read the news smoothly and unhesitatingly. By the last months of 1940 the only comment a German commentator managed to intrude was an exasperated, 'Oh that's not fair!'

### **The news, enemies, allies, and neutrals**

Another, more romantic image of the Corporation at war was of the BBC as provocateur, spy, and supporter of resistance movements. The Corporation recruited many refugees to staff the foreign broadcasts, and these formed a new and exotic element within the Corporation's staid departments. 'The Hungarian Unit,' read a dry memo of the period, 'a duel averted by Duckworth.' A recurring tension in all of these sections was between the demands of the centrally controlled news service, and the interests of individual nations. The Danish section complained that they were not allowed to deal with events in Denmark itself in sufficient detail. According to Bennett, the correspondents who supplied the service with its information from neutral Sweden even organized a news strike in an attempt to change the BBC's policy.

Other countries complained that the broadcasts implicitly criticized the occupied countries. Listeners who took risks to hear the BBC felt that they should be complimented on their resilience, rather than condemned for their failure to do more. Indeed, like home

broadcasting, the Foreign Service suffered from a tendency to exhort rather than inform or support in the first year of the war. Richard Crossman argued that too many of those employed in directing propaganda had come from the advertising world. 'Do you suffer from National Socialism?' was their line. 'Then buy British Democracy!'

Another tension was the extent to which the broadcasts should encourage (as one BBC administrator put it) 'listeners to *do* something rather than *feel* something'. It seemed presumptuous to instruct foreigners in sabotage when the British had little experience of it, and were themselves safe. More significantly, the dramatic success of the 'V' campaign, when in 1941 Dutch, French, Belgians, and Scandinavians in occupied Europe were asked to use the letter 'V' as a rallying sign, revealed the dangers of such a strategy. In one Vichy town, Moulins, graffiti Vs for 'Victoire' were so numerous that the Germans imposed fines and penalties on the whole town. In Prague 'multitudes of little Vs had appeared on all sides'. From Belgium it was reported that 'never had so much chalk been sold so quickly'. The campaign, initiated almost accidentally, was evidently a success. Its effects, however, were disastrous. It merely exposed those who were prepared to be active resisters to the Germans at a time when there was no possibility of any allied invasion. Men lost their lives in a campaign with no practical goal. In addition, the BBC was in effect making foreign policy. The campaign was stopped. Crossman later argued that it was a great mistake for those involved in psychological warfare to suggest that they have 'a mystical substitute for military action'. Broadcasting had to be as concerned with preventing resisters from acting unwisely as with prompting them to action when the right moment came.

It is not easy to assess the effect of the BBC's foreign broadcasts. Indeed it is difficult enough to decide what the overall impact of resistance was on the German war effort. Every clandestine listener, however, had already committed an act of resistance, and the BBC's service provided information – even if of a selective kind – to populations who were starved of news. The BBC's bulletins provided most of the material for the underground press in occupied Europe. M. R. D. Foot has concluded that the role of broadcasting was to 'keep the mechanism of the canal gates of freedom oiled and in decent order, till the water levels of fluctuating public opinion could move up and down again'.

This image of the heroic BBC was not, however, shared in the USA. 'To Americans, not very enthusiastic about British cooking, the warmed up remnants of the original meal were not very palatable. News bulletins – one half an hour long – often contained items from yesterday's American press,' wrote an academic, Emmanuel Katz, in 1944. The constant stress on the collapse of social barriers in Britain only emphasized how tenacious they had been, and to what extent they still survived. However, American public opinion was never wholly pro-British, and the attitudes towards broadcasting were part of a wider feeling about the war.

In matters concerning the allies the BBC's policy was dictated by government. When the Russians started to fight the Nazis, the cover of the *Listener* was devoted to a pageant in honour of Russia, while the *Radio Times* was packed with tributes to Russian workers. This was a period of extraordinary enthusiasm for Russia and all things Russian. As Elizabeth Bowen wrote of a character in her wartime novel, *The Heat of the Day*, 'The effect of her was, at first glance, that of a predominating number of London girls this summer when the idealization of Russia was at its height – that of a flying try at the Soviet comrade type.' However, the BBC was told not to include the *Internationale* in the popular Sunday evening concert of allied national anthems. The Corporation abandoned the series rather than be embarrassed by the sound of the communist song.

### **Conclusion: 'my country true or false?'**

In 1939 the Home News Service editor had said that in the event of war the BBC would 'tell the truth and nothing but the truth, even if the news was horrid'. By the end of the war the Corporation was arguing that the pursuit of truth had been victorious. 'Today', the 1946 *Handbook* proclaimed, 'we can point to the history of broadcasting in Europe and say that certain good principles in broadcasting have defeated the worst possible principles.' During the war the BBC seldom lied if it could avoid doing so. Indeed as the war began with a series of devastating defeats for the allies it might have been difficult to disguise the situation. However, that the BBC could claim independence was at least partly because it suited the government that it should do so. For the government continually intervened in the conduct of the Corporation, and merely chose not to control it directly.

Veracity, however, was perhaps the only acceptable aim for a democratic news policy. More practically, telling the truth was probably the most effective propaganda with which to face a sustained war. 'You must hate propaganda to do it well,' Richard Crossman wrote, 'and we British did hate it and therefore took more trouble to conceal what we were doing.'

The contemporary judgement of the BBC's performance was enthusiastic. 'In a world of poison the BBC became the great antiseptic,' said Léon Blum, the French socialist leader. Recently the claims of broadcasters that they have independence have been challenged. 'Bias' and opinion are fundamental conditions of the production of news, not accidental pathologies. Hence the work of the BBC during the war has been viewed with greater scepticism. A belief in its independence is little more than a self-adulatory part of the British myth.

The BBC cannot simply be distinguished from its totalitarian opponents in terms of its intentions. In both Britain and Germany broadcasting was seen as a crucial instrument in the war effort. Indeed both countries even shared practical concerns: hopes should never be

raised unless they could be met; controversy between enemy allies was, as Goebbels claimed, 'a small plant which thrives best when it is left to its natural growth'. He continued that 'News policy is a weapon of war. Its purpose is to wage war and not to give out information.' The BBC also viewed news as part of propaganda. However, the use of the 'news' weapon was determined by quite different constraints and pressures in a democratic society.

British home propaganda depended on an informed public. The BBC remained a civilian institution, whose employees saw themselves primarily as broadcasters. Once committed to a policy of informing the public, the war acted as an incentive within the Corporation for an improvement in the news services. Although the BBC broadcast optimistic official figures for enemy fighters shot down in the Battle of Britain, tended to treat raids on Germany as victories, cut, edited, and censored news, its main purpose remained that of telling people what was happening.

If the Service Ministries and the government were concerned to limit the amount and kind of information broadcast, the main pressure within the Corporation was to tell the people as much as possible. This did not mean telling them everything, but the heritage of obligations imposed by the Corporation's public service monopoly meant that the public knew more than might have been expected.

In Britain, Asa Briggs has observed, the mystique of radio meant little. In Germany, the new medium had been credited with almost magical powers of suggestion. These views affected the way in which broadcasting was used in both countries. The dominating image of the BBC during the war (indeed the dominating image of the war in Britain) was one of relentless domesticity. 'Every time I listen to these programmes I cry,' a factory worker told Mass Observation about a radio link-up between soldiers and their families. 'You hear the women giving the men their messages . . . they can hardly get through sometimes.' Another describes her day. She gets back from work 'about nine o'clock, and they've got the wireless on. Dad's asleep in the chair – the kiddies are in bed.' Families were united around the radio; 52 per cent of respondents to one survey always listened to the news with their families, 76 per cent preferred to do so if possible. In Titmuss's classic account of the development of welfare policy during the war, he saw the security of the family as the crucial guarantor of good morale. By 1945 the radio had become an essential element of the image of the family in its home.

Before the war the BBC had regarded the regular expectation of particular kinds of programmes as 'lazy listening'. In contrast, during the war the BBC made considerable efforts to develop such habits. Regular programmes produced predictable audiences. The knowledge of these could be used in propaganda appeals and information campaigns. Indeed the predictability of the daily broadcasts was a kind of security in itself. 'At the moment, all similes for safety are slipping,' wrote C. A. Hodson in 1941. 'How can one say as safe as

houses?’ But the BBC at least seemed dependable. Modern programme planning, a matter of inducing habit, was at least in part a consequence of the war.

By 1945 the Corporation had apparently become less aloof. Programmes like *ITMA*, *Hi Gang*, and *Worker’s Playtime* introduced a more vigorous tradition of speech and humour to broadcasting, one that was closer to the music hall tradition than the well-mannered ‘variety’ of pre-war programmes. They were part of a feeling that the British war, unlike that of the prudish Germans, was taken seriously, but never solemnly. Even government propaganda came to appreciate the ‘common man’s sense of humour’:

Those who have the will to win  
 Eat potatoes in their skin,  
 Knowing that the sight of peelings  
 Deeply hurts Lord Woolton’s feelings

exhorted the Ministry of Food. Humour was part of the protective self-image with which the British faced air attacks and the possibility of invasion. It was an image that the BBC helped to create, and was determined to encourage. Harold Nicolson even broadcast talks on the subtle superiority of British humour to that of the status-conscious Germans (*Listener*, December 1942).

There was, of course, another war which did not get much broadcasting time. This was one of apathy, and dingy making-do rather than cheerful resilience. Life in shelters was not always a protracted East End party; it was squalid, with inadequate sanitary arrangements, little food, and chaotic overcrowding. Novels of the period document the dreariness and austerity of life in Britain after several years of war, and newspapers campaigned against the petty-mindedness of official regulations and bureaucracy. The BBC did not campaign for the public on any of these issues.

However, the Corporation succeeded in producing a dignified but humorous image of what kind of people the British were. It was not that the BBC ‘came closer to the people’. Rather it represented them as a liberal, compassionate, reforming administrator might have seen them. The BBC innovated within a repertoire of very traditional ideas. Subsequently it has been argued that there was a significant change in public mood during the war. The people became determined that there would be greater social justice after it. Certainly the war changed the BBC, and it changed public taste.

Yet the day after the war in Europe ended, the public changed again. The audience for the news dropped by half, and never returned to wartime levels.



## Notes

- 1 D. G. Bridson, *Prospero and Ariel: The Rise and Fall of Radio* (London, Gollancz, 1971), p. 269.
- 2 D. Cooper, *Old Men Forget* (London, Hart-Davis, 1953), p. 79.
- 3 Harold Hobson, *Daily Express* (14 January 1940).
- 4 T. Kavanagh, *Tommy Handley* (London, Hodder & Stoughton, 1949), p. 73.
- 5 *Listener* correspondence, *BBC Written Archives* (John Hilton).
- 6 Board of Governors' Minutes (5 July 1941), *BBC Written Archives*.
- 7 Maconachie to Ryan (6 September 1940), *BBC Written Archives*.
- 8 See for further development of this example, J. Seaton, 'The BBC and the Holocaust', *European Journal of Communication*, vol. 2, 1, 1987.
- 9 Mass Observation (October 1940), File 473, 'What the people are talking about today'.
- 10 A. P. Waterfield to W. Palmer, *Ministry of Information Files*, INF 1/238.
- 11 A. S. Hibberd, *This is London* (London, Macdonald & Evans, 1950), p. 307.
- 12 Mass Observation, *The Press and Its Readers* (London, Art & Technics, 1949), p. 41.
- 13 'The British Institute of Public Opinion Survey, the attitudes towards the press and broadcasting and other sources of information (1940-5)' in H. Cantril (ed.), *Public Opinion 1935-46* (New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1951).
- 14 *Ministry of Information*, INF 1/250, Home Morale Emergency Committee, Item 13 (22 May 1940).

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*Social revolution?*

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It is a commonplace of twentieth-century social history that world war has been the agent, or at least the catalyst, of major change. What has been less noticed is the extent to which wartime forms of organization – born of the unusual conditions and needs of the moment – have created structural fossils in important areas of policy, surviving immutably in peacetime, but with no particular relevance to the post-war world.

Broadcasting and education provide interesting examples of this process. Both were drastically reorganized at the end of the Second World War. In each case the most striking feature of the reforms was the imposition of a ‘tripartite’ division, based on a supposed hierarchy of talent. The changes represented a sharp move away from a view of society as an aggregate of individuals towards an official concept of particular groups with separate needs.

### **Broadcasting**

Reith’s programme policy depended on an assumption of cultural homogeneity: not that everybody was the same, but that culture was single and undifferentiated. He had been determined to avoid the mediocrity which he believed would accompany freedom of choice. ‘It is occasionally indicated to us that we are apparently setting out to give the public what we think they need – not what they want,’ he wrote in 1924. ‘But few know what they want and very few what they need.’ Advisory panels of ‘experts’ were established to lay down canons of taste in music, and to adjudicate correct pronunciation. Their purpose was to give authority to cultural values, not to represent listeners’ interests.

Reith believed that the function of broadcasting was primarily educative: its purpose was to train ‘character’. According to this view, your class of origin and what you learnt mattered less than how you lived and how you learnt. This principle was the basis for his programming policy. Men might be unequal, but they could all try equally. Hence the Corporation defended a policy of mixed programming, in which talks, light music, chamber music, quizzes,

vaudeville and plays succeeded each other. The service was not planned to provide appropriate listening for different interests, or to allow people to avoid what was serious in favour of the trivial. Reith was determined that the audience should encounter everything that broadcasting could offer.

Mixed programming determined many aspects of the Corporation's policy between the wars. In 1934 a BBC administrator wrote that 'the most advantageous single extension or change in programme policy'<sup>1</sup> would be to stop broadcasting programmes at regular times and so break the audience's conservative listening habits. This was part of the Corporation's campaign against what was contemptuously known as the 'tap' listener 'who wants to have one or more very light programmes available at all hours between breakfast and bedtime'.<sup>2</sup> 'The BBC', the 1932 *Yearbook* claimed, 'definitely aims at having an interval of four or five minutes between programmes . . . it is obviously irritating for a listener who, switching on his set to hear, say, the news, finds himself listening to the last minute of an opera or vaudeville turn.' Listening was a serious business.

The BBC's belief in cultural homogeneity was a useful weapon in the defence of its broadcasting monopoly, particularly against the commercial wireless exchanges. These retransmitted a selection of BBC and continental programmes to simple home 'speakers', improving reception and making it cheaper. The number of such stations had risen from 34 in 1929 to 343 by 1935. The BBC argued, in the 1931 *Handbook*, that the relay system

contains within it forces which uncontrolled might be disruptive of the spirit and intention of the BBC charter. The persons in charge of wireless exchanges have power, by replacing selected items of the Corporation's programmes with transmission from abroad, to alter entirely the general drift of the BBC's programme policy.

The BBC was defending its own position, and what it assumed was a generally recognizable set of cultural values. Reith's objection to audience research was also based on the principle of cultural homogeneity. He did not want to know popular preference, because of the danger that programme organizers would pander to it.

The BBC had a distinctive model of the listener. 'Broadcasting is not mass projection, though it seems to be so, it is an individual intimate business,' wrote Hilda Matheson, the first head of the Talks Department in the *Sociological Review* (no. 3, 1935). The personal relationship between listener and programme was elevated into a principle. The class and tastes of groups of listeners were irrelevant. Any variety in programmes was justified by the changing moods of the average listener and not by reference to the interests of different groups. In this way, 'entertainment' had its appropriate place: it was meant to provide periods of relaxation in the broadcasting diet of the Reithian 'average' listener.

The Reithian approach was paralleled during the 1920s and 1930s by similarly 'unitary' assumptions in state education. The content of state education between the wars was common to all schools: children merely received more or less of it. At the top of the ladder children had access to 'the whole world of learning', while at the bottom they had 'the hems of learning only'.<sup>3</sup> The curriculum was governed by notions of a 'general liberal education', a direct legacy of Matthew Arnold's philosophy of education.

Educational policy reflected the traditional psychology of the nineteenth century, argued the Spens Report on secondary education in 1938:

with its emphasis on faculties and its belief in the doctrine of formal education and mental transfer which played an important part in perpetuating a curriculum common to all pupils.

It was assumed that most boys and girls were equipped with the same mental endowments, that most of them developed the same way, and at almost the same rate of progress. Although some scholarships were available to the academic secondary grammar schools, these were very scarce, and most pupils paid fees. University scholarships were even more rare. Yet all the children in grammar schools followed a pattern of education which was designed to secure university places which only 3 per cent of them actually attained. Even in non-academic secondary schools, the curriculum was merely a weaker version of the university-dominated teaching of the grammar schools.

State education, like state broadcasting, was (in theory) designed to enable the hard-working and able to develop those faculties which were regarded as common to all. In education there was also emphasis on the development of 'character', a nebulous and undefined moral concept, taken undiluted from the 'muscular Christian' ethos of leadership training which governed public schools. Until Cyril Burt's ideas on scientific intelligence testing were accepted during the 1940s and 1950s, the ideology of 'character' pervaded educational policy as well as broadcasting.

In many ways, of course, education and broadcasting are not comparable: for one thing, state education hardly grew at all during the 1930s while broadcasting developed very quickly. For another, broadcasting was centrally controlled with a national monopoly, while education was administered locally, and alongside (rather than in competition with) a prestigious private sector. Nevertheless, broadcasting and schooling as communicators of accepted values have enough in common for the similarity to be striking. The similarities in the organizational changes, which occurred as a result of the impulse for reform created by the Second World War, are more remarkable still.

### **Reform, the war, and education**

The needs of war radically altered education and broadcasting. The Education Act, 1944, which introduced compulsory secondary education for all, has been seen by many as the finest achievement of a great reforming minister, R. A. Butler, who based it on what he described to his biographer, Ralph Harris, as a 'sensationally ingenious report'. More recent assessments have been less enthusiastic. According to Brian Simon,

Through the late 1940s and 1950s when so much might have been accomplished, the development of secondary education for all was restricted and distorted by the dead hand of a doctrine brought to a point during the depressed 1930s – the doctrine that in effect secondary education is not for all.

The Education Act recommended that schools be reorganized 'firstly to provide opportunities for a special cast of mind to manifest itself . . . indeed to develop specialized interests and aptitudes'.<sup>4</sup> The Act was not the result of radical political pressure, but of official initiatives within the Board of Education itself. In 1938 the Spens Report had suggested that 'It is becoming more and more evident that a simple liberal education for all is impractical.' It drew a distinction between those children 'who work with hands, work with tongue, or work with pen' and suggested that 'one child differs from another far more than is generally supposed'. The Norwood Report and the 1944 Act went further and argued that these differences were held in common by groups of children. They distinguished between three kinds, the child 'who is interested in learning for its own sake, who is interested in causes and who can grasp an argument. . . . [He] is sensitive . . . he is interested in the relatedness of related things . . . he will have some capacity to enjoy from an aesthetic point of view.' A child of this kind was to go to a grammar school, the distinct feature of which 'lies in the intellectual ideal which it upholds'. This category of school was to retain the values which had been intended for all schools before the war, and was to produce the new professional and managerial élite.

The second kind of child 'often has an uncanny insight into the intricacies of mechanisms, whereas the subtleties of language construction are too delicate for him. To justify itself to his mind, knowledge must be capable of immediate application.' These children would 'go into industry' and were to attend the new technical schools.

The third kind of child 'may have much ability but it will be in the realm of facts. He is interested in things as they are . . . he must have immediate return for his effort.' These residual children were to attend the new secondary modern schools. These schools were to be separate but equal and were, according to the report (incredibly) to have 'parity of prestige'. The purpose of the modern schools was distinct because these children would need education for

their leisure: 'This homely aspect of education is often the basis of future happiness, and is as vitally necessary as it can be interesting.' It was implicit in the Norwood Report and the Act that there were children who could think, children who could do, and the rest.

This division of schools and children was not consciously based on any scientific evidence, but was justified on the grounds that 'these rough groupings have in fact established themselves in general educational experience'. Immediately the Act was published Cyril Burt attacked its underlying psychological assumptions. He argued that his own work had long since demolished the myth of separate 'mental types', and that the proposed reforms had overlooked the fundamental discovery of his work on intelligence: that anyone who was above average in any one aspect of intellectual performance was likely to be above average in all of them. 'It is difficult to see', he wrote, 'how even administrative necessity can lead us to discern the indistinguishable and to find three types of mind when they do not exist.' However, Burt's attitude was surprising, for the process of selection and division was to be carried out with his own 'scientific' intelligence testing. More strikingly, the proportions of children which it was projected would attend each kind of school closely approximated to Burt's 'normal curve' of the distribution of intelligence within the population. Indeed, in an article devoted to 'The psychology of listeners', Burt wrote: 'Politically no doubt all men are born equal. Mentally however, as the results of surveys incontestably show, the range of individual differences is far wider than had ever been suspected.'<sup>5</sup>

The classification of children proposed by the Act depended on the war experience of Burt's followers in training and assigning members of the armed services to appropriate jobs. Psychologists used increasingly detailed tests developed from Burt's work, not only to guarantee that the various services had equal shares of intelligent personnel, but also to distinguish between 'skill' and 'character', and to identify a whole range of special mechanical, logical, and clerical abilities. 'The value of vocational or educational classification', wrote Vernon and Barry about their work as psychologists during the war, 'lies not merely in the closer co-ordination of human capacity with job . . . but also with their effects on morale.' Workers, they argued, were happier if they were not disturbed by association with those with abilities far beyond, or behind, their own. Thus during the war 'streaming' was developed and rationalized.

The effect of the war is also revealed in the provision of the new 'technical' schools. During the war there had been a shift in the subjects in which children were examined towards the sciences, in response to the increased need for technical skills. Lord Hankey wrote in 1941 that 'Technical colleges, although ill housed, ill equipped and understaffed had responded without hesitation to the needs of the services and industry and had magnificently reorganized themselves to train men and women for the war effort.' It was these experiences, a dramatic increase in the need for technical and scientific workers, and the reorganization of schools and

training to produce them, which had led to the creation of the new ‘technical schools’ and the perception of the ‘practically able’ child.

In the Act it was expected that these new schools would take some of the children who would previously have gone to grammar schools, and direct them into more technical and industrial work. These schools simply failed to appear. This was partly because money was not available. Also during the war the government had been able to direct the allocation of the entire workforce; in a post-war world this was far more difficult. Moreover, hopes that private industry would seek technically educated school-leavers for training did not materialize; employers continued to prefer young people with a ‘general’ academic education where they could get them.

R. A. Butler had written in 1942 that

Education cannot by itself create the social structure of a country. I have to take the world as I find it and the world I find is one in which there is a very diversified range of types. Educational progress must be along the grain of human nature.<sup>6</sup>

Yet arguably the Act and its implementation was precisely an attempt at massive social engineering. It was not, as Simon has argued, merely a rationalization of the status quo, but marked a major change in the official perception of the child. It also represented a new recognition of class, and the fragmentation of culture. The old, liberal culture survived, but was confined to the curricula of the ‘professionals’ in their grammar schools; while in modern schools children for whom exams were inappropriate were to be taught how to entertain themselves.

### **Reform, the war, and the BBC**

The war also revolutionized the BBC. During the war Reith’s ‘cultural unity’ was abandoned. After a visit to the troops in France, Ogilvie, Reith’s successor as Director General, had come back convinced that the morale of the forces would be improved by knowing that their families at home were listening to the same programmes with them, but also that the Corporation’s whole programming would have to change. Ian Hay, a BBC comptroller, had written in 1939, ‘We shall need a lot of entertainment before this business is over.’ It was recognized that the new forces service would have to be quite different from a ‘watered-down version of our peacetime programmes’, for ‘if we give them serious music, long plays, or peacetime programme talks they will not listen’.<sup>7</sup> The lure of the continental stations could not be ignored during the war and programme changes would inevitably have more long-term

consequences. An official wrote ominously, 'We shall not be able to return to our Sunday policy when the war ends.'

More light music, comedy, crooning, and jazz were justified not only by the immediacy of wartime demands, but also, crucially, by a new model of the psychology of the listener. The first step argued that the service had to be changed because troops were listening to it communally in the mess or in camps. Then it was suggested that different programmes were appropriate to different occupations. Very quickly the audience research department was trying to establish which kinds of music had the best effect on factory production.

Modern wars change the status of entertainment: leisure is seen as an aspect of 'public morale'. This was particularly true in Britain after 1940. Nevertheless, the Corporation was anxious not to be accused of producing 'programmes fit for morons', and the *Listener* printed many letters on this subject. 'I think you will find this army more highbrow than you suppose,' wrote one officer (15 February 1941).

What had first been seen as a temporary expedient became a permanent feature when the General Forces Programme was changed to the Light Programme in 1946. Grace Wyndham Goldie commented on the consequences of this innovation for the internal structure of the Corporation. 'It is not only that this is lighter, more gay, fresher in its approach; but for good or evil it is more closely related to the box office than any broadcasting in England has ever been before' (*Listener*, 26 December 1940). Competition was introduced between various parts of the Corporation. It meant the recognition of distinct groups whose tastes the BBC was obliged to identify rather than to change. This internal reform was of more fundamental importance than the competition later offered by commercial television. An editorial in the *Listener* claimed that 'the position is that the Forces Programme is carefully planned and not a casual proliferation of high jinks for low brows' (13 March 1941). Yet providing the public with what it wanted had become central to the Corporation's plans.

The introduction of a 'Light' Programme inevitably had implications for the Home Service. As early as 1940 the Home Service Board had decided that the 'barometer of listeners' preferences' should be a regular item on its agenda. However, the Home Service also broadcast the main news bulletins, and came to be seen as the part of the BBC which was most concerned with 'citizenship, family and home'.

The final and most revealing innovation was the introduction of the Third Programme. An internal memorandum in 1944 had suggested that the BBC should provide three competing services. Programme A 'should be of the highest possible cultural level, devoted to artistic endeavour, serious documentary, educational broadcasting, and the deeper investigation of the news, corresponding in outlook to a *Times* of the air'. Programme B, 'the real home programme of the people of the United Kingdom', would 'give talks which would inform the whole democracy rather than an already informed section, and be generally so designed that



it will steadily, but imperceptibly, raise the standard of taste, entertainment, outlook and citizenship'.<sup>8</sup> Programme C was to divert, and needed little detailing.

The Third Programme was a survival of the Reithian ethic of 'mixed' programming. It emphasized that it should be judged by the whole programming of the service rather than individual items.

The daily broadcasting schedules rush by the listener like the scenery past the windows of an express train. . . . The Third Programme from the beginning has arrived at a standard which has brought it into conflict with this ephemeral characteristic of broadcasting.<sup>9</sup>

Elsewhere, Harold Nicolson wrote, 'Every cultural pill is coated with sugar; and an item which it is felt might be unpalatable is tendered with a tone of apology, or with the horrid cheeriness of the scoutmaster, the padre, or the matron.' The Third regarded broadcasting as an art.

The 1950 White Paper on the future of broadcasting argued that 'listeners will now normally have a wider choice of contrasting programmes', while Nicolson, who had been involved in the creation of the Third, was at pains to point out that 'at no time, I am glad to say, did we entertain the doctrine that the listening public should be segregated between sheep or goats'. Sir William Haley, the Director General who had originally thought of the Third, put the classification clearly in a lecture given in 1948:

Before the war the system was to confront [the listener] with pendulum-like leaps. The devotees of [Irving] Berlin were suddenly confronted with Bach. . . . Since the war we have been feeling our way along a more indirect approach. It rests on the conception of the community as a broadly based cultural pyramid, slowly aspiring upwards.

This concept resembled the hierarchy of ability.

### **Progress or rationalization?**

By the end of the war British broadcasting and education had been radically reformed. Is it a coincidence that the two most important vehicles of national culture were reorganized almost simultaneously and in each case along very similar lines?

The reforms may have been made possible by the new weight given to public opinion by the war. However, in both areas of policy the form which the changes took depended on a new official way of looking at children on the one hand, and at listeners on the other. In this,

distinctions were in effect being made between the tastes, abilities, and interests of different social groupings.

Listeners and children are not obviously analogous. Yet what is striking is the similarity in proportions of people assigned, quite independently, by education and broadcasting authorities to three categories. It is as though in the natural order of things there were three types of children and three types of listeners reflecting a three-way divide in society as a whole. It was expected that the population would divide as follows:<sup>10</sup>

Grammar schools 5%	Third Programme 6%
Technical schools 15%	Home Service 20%
Modern schools 80%	Light Programme 74%

In both cases the figures were based more on a hunch than statistics, and in both cases they proved wholly unrealistic. In education the technical schools barely got off the ground and completely failed to produce the technical administrators that had been expected; instead the grammar school section expanded. The estimate of the Third Programme audience of serious listeners was wildly optimistic; it never attracted more than 1–2 per cent of listeners. Neither projection was officially justified in terms of social class; yet in both cases what seems to have occurred is the imposition on social policy of official assumptions based on military and administrative experience.

There has been much discussion about the social effects of the war. Calder and Marwick have pointed to a major upheaval; Addison has suggested the culmination of a long, slow revolution in attitudes; Pelling argued that there was not much fundamental change at all. What is clear is that there was a dramatic and permanent increase in the power and scope of government. Whitehall's view of society and human nature, essentially meritocratic and hierarchical, pervaded policies which in normal times would have been fought out in the political arena. The reforms in both broadcasting and education reflected an approach to organization which had more to do with a civil service conception of the world as itself writ large, than with the reality of the world as it existed. Thus in Whitehall there were administrative, executive, and clerical grades (and in the services there were officers, NCOs, and privates). Officials found their own tripartite system natural and efficient. In creating new structures for the public they assumed a similar pattern of talent and need. In broadcasting, as in education, reforms contained a contradiction. On the one hand they were progressive in that they sought to cater for the whole society; but on the other they reinforced class divisions by giving new life to old hierarchical assumptions.

## Notes

- 1 Filson Young to Dawney, BBC Internal Memorandum, 'Programme policy', *BBC Written Archives* (3 March 1934).
- 2 'Programme revision committee', *BBC Written Archives* (June 1934).
- 3 Board of Education, *Inspectors' Report* (1932), p. 12, para 7 [Cmd 4068].
- 4 *The Nation's Schools: Their Plans and Purposes*, Ministry of Education Pamphlet 1 (London, HMSO, 1945).
- 5 Sir Cyril Burt, 'The psychology of listeners', *BBC Quarterly*, IV, 1 (April 1949), p. 7.
- 6 Lord Butler, *The Education Act of 1944 and After*, The First Noel Buxton Lecture, University of Essex (Harlow, Longman, 1965), p. 21.
- 7 Ryan to Nicolson, BBC Internal Memorandum, *BBC Written Archives* (17 January 1940).
- 8 'Programme development', BBC Internal Memorandum, *BBC Written Archives* (14 February 1944).
- 9 BBC, *The Third Programme: Plans for October–December 1944*.
- 10 Sources for education figures, Ministry of Education circular 731 (1944), quoted in P. H. J. H. Gosdon, *Education in the Second World War* (London, Methuen, 1976); and for broadcasting, *Listener* (February 1946), and BBC Internal Memorandum, 'Projection for the Third Programme', *BBC Written Archives* (14 May 1946).

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*The fall of the BBC*

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In 1946, when television broadcasting was resumed, the BBC's popularity at home and prestige abroad were even greater than before, largely because of the wartime experience. Yet barely a decade later, the BBC's monopoly of the air waves was destroyed. Television and subsequently radio were placed on a new competitive footing. More than anything else, this has shaped the aims, structure, and output of all television programming over the last quarter of a century.

The change was not brought about by public pressure, but by a small group within the ruling Conservative Party. It was opposed by bishops, vice-chancellors, peers, trade unions, the Labour Party, and most national newspapers. Reith compared the introduction of commercial broadcasting into Britain with that of dog racing, smallpox, and bubonic plague.<sup>1</sup> The objections to commercial broadcasting were diverse, but most were anti-American, and opposed the encouragement of crude materialist desires. Criticisms of this kind were particularly vehement on the left. More recently, however, some socialist writers have taken a different view, arguing that commercial television was, in fact, a cultural liberator, taking the control of broadcasting out of the hands of a patronizing and paternalist establishment, and increasing the scope of genuinely popular influences.

### **Austerity, monopoly, and the Beveridge Report**

The BBC's prestige contributed to its undoing. The Corporation had assumed that it was invulnerable and so had the 1945 Labour government which consequently did not hurry to renew its licence. In 1947 Beveridge was asked to conduct an inquiry into the BBC's affairs. He might have been expected to sympathize with Reith's legacy of benevolent, high-minded despotism at the BBC. for Beveridge had once claimed that his ideal society would be run by neither parliament nor dictators, but by professional administrators – 'social doctors' – who would organize society 'to adapt the social and economic relations of clients so as to produce

the maximum economic health'.<sup>2</sup> However, as a liberal, Beveridge was highly critical of the Corporation.

He distrusted the tone and character of the BBC, which 'beginning with Londonization, going on to secretiveness and self-satisfaction, and ending up with a dangerous sense of mission became a sense of divine right'. He was constantly on the watch for 'the four scandals of monopoly: bureaucracy, complacency, favouritism and inefficiency'. Written in Beveridge's inimitable style, the report nevertheless finally recommended that the Corporation's licence be renewed, because the alternative, American-style commercial television, seemed far worse.

The recommendations of the Beveridge Report were ignored by the Conservatives after they beat the Labour Party in the 1951 general election. Instead, Selwyn Lloyd's dissenting minority report, which was in favour of commercial broadcasting, became the basis for the commercial lobby. Nevertheless, Beveridge's findings influenced the form of British commercial broadcasting. First, the report preferred spot adverts to sponsored programmes because they gave advertisers less control over programme content. 'A public broadcasting service', the report commented, 'might have its controlled and limited advertisement hour, as every newspaper had in its advertising columns, without sacrificing the independence of standards of broadcasting.' Second, the report advocated the regionalization of broadcasting and the decentralization of the BBC. These arguments affected the organization of the commercial system when it was introduced.

The commercial television lobby has been seen by some writers as a tiny group of back-bench MPs, 'who worked night and day on the project'. However, they were supported by the immense power of the great entertainment industries. Pye Radio, the largest West End theatre management, and J. Walter Thompson, the advertising agency, were all involved in the campaign. Although a member of the group declared in the House of Commons that 'Any suggestion that the Bill was fostered by commercial interests is a complete figment of the imagination of the Party opposite', the speaker at the time was a director of various electronics firms who expected to profit out of an increase in the market for televisions.<sup>3</sup> 'At what point', H. H. Wilson asked, 'were the members speaking as MPs representing their constituencies, and when were they speaking as directors, managers or employees of advertising agencies, market research organizations or radio and television manufacturers?'

However, the most important organizer of the lobby was a broadcaster, Norman Collins. He had been director of the Light Programme, and controller of BBC Television. When he was not appointed Chief Executive of Television, Collins resigned from the BBC. He told *The Times* that he had left

because of a clash of principle . . . whether the new medium of TV shall be allowed to develop at this, the most crucial stage of its existence, along its own lines and by its own methods, or whether it shall be merged into the colossus of sound broadcasting.

The commercial lobby fought a hard and frequently unscrupulous battle. It was successful because important members of the government, including the Prime Minister, Churchill, were not prepared to defend the BBC. Significantly the campaign also had the active support of Lord Woolton. He had modernized the Conservative Party organization before the 1951 election and brought a new kind of candidate into parliament. This group represented industry and advertising rather than law or hereditary wealth.

Woolton wanted free enterprise to dominate the 'new age of post-war prosperity'. 'Our individual lives today', he complained in a broadcast, 'are hemmed in by no less than 25,000 controls.' He wanted to associate the party with the long-term material aspirations of the people, and believed that commercial television would help to do this.

The opposition to commercial television was organized by the National Television Council with Christopher Mayhew as its secretary. Support came from surprising quarters. 'The Establishment', wrote Henry Fairlie, 'came as near as it has ever done to organizing a conspiracy against the government of the day – a Conservative Government.'<sup>4</sup> This group objected to the cultural consequences of commercial television: it would 'vulgarize, bowdlerize, and coarsen', wrote one critic.

The argument became more fierce when it was learnt that in the USA the Coronation had been shown interspersed with NBC's television chimp, J. Fred Muggs, selling tea. A deodorant had been advertised just before the ritual anointment. Horrified MPs suggested that if a commercial system were started here, royal tours would be interrupted by commercial breaks extolling the makers of the Queen's chairs and carpets.

Nevertheless the Act introducing commercial television was passed in 1954 because most Tories believed that in some way it would promote industry, commerce, and the free market. The new service was named, by some genius of euphemism, 'Independent Television'.

### **Commercial television and the new world**

'A whole new world has come,' proclaimed the first commercial television *Yearbook* in 1955. 'We've won, and now we can really get going,' said Norman Collins. 'The importance of the introduction of commercial TV goes far beyond any question of the merits of commercial versus public service broadcasting,' wrote Wilson, 'for it may also seem to symbolize a change within the Conservative Party, and give expression to an accumulation of influences which are securing the future of British society.' ITV brought about a revolution, it has been

claimed, because it challenged the complacent pre-war conservatism of the BBC. The Corporation was staffed by narrow-minded, middle-class professional bureaucrats who had little sympathy for working-class interests. Norman Collins complained of the 'apathy, disinterest and often open hostility towards the new medium' that existed within the BBC. Lord Simon of Wythenshawe, chairman of the BBC Governors, claimed that during the early 1950s only about one-fifth of the business the Director General presented to the board was concerned with television. Indeed in 1946 when Haley was shown a television demonstration he had remarked that he would not have one in his house.

The BBC, one producer wrote, regarded radio as 'the father figure, established and responsible', while television was seen as a 'spendthrift tiresome adolescent'.<sup>5</sup> The BBC bureaucrats, secure in the imperial comforts of Broadcasting House, deluged television producers in the unheated wastes of north London with memos. These detailed the proper procedures for the purchase of books and why it was outrageous to suggest that book covers should be cut up, even to be shown on the screen. The tensions were exacerbated by the influx into television of cameramen, technicians, and directors who were used to the high living which characterized the precarious film world. 'Disorder has been repeatedly reported from the television studios . . . new employees do not seem to have become one with the Corporation,' read one ominous memo of the period. 'Perhaps', another memo replied, 'a brief course on the history of the Corporation might be of assistance?'<sup>6</sup>

Indeed during the 1950s the Corporation appointments policy was apparently designed to keep the new service in order, rather than accelerate its development. Gerald Beadle was an amicable BBC administrator, quietly approaching retirement in the Western Region, when the call came. 'About 1953', he remarked, 'every BBC directorship in London was filled by younger men than me . . . but then in 1956 something quite unexpected happened . . . at the age of fifty-seven I was appointed Director of TV.' Beadle was to hold this post during the critical early years of commercial television.

Beadle was a typical example of the BBC administrator of this period. The Corporation man, as Burns has argued, did not work for the BBC, he worked *in it* – as a secular church of professional excellence. One writer noted that a Corporation producer 'breathes the BBC ritual welcome to eminent persons as they arrive' (to have their personalities 'brought out', rather than be put on the spot), 'How good of you to come!' (*Encounter*; October 1960). The Corporation saw itself as a particularly dedicated branch of the civil service, and this image affected its approach to television.

However, the BBC's performance during the 1950s needs scrutiny. Despite the overwhelming bureaucracy, a remarkable generation of television producers and directors started work during this period. They were to dominate the entire output of British television, on both channels, for the next twenty years. Even the Corporation's lack of interest in television had benefits. Because it was seen as relatively unimportant it was left alone. Goldie claims this allowed programme-makers far greater initiative.

The most serious charge against the BBC was that it starved the new service of funds. In 1950 the BBC's television budget was only one-half of that allocated to the Home Service. However, in the period of experimental broadcasts during the 1930s, television had been able to develop only because the BBC had been willing to subsidize it out of wireless revenues. (In the USA, where it depended on advertising funds, the service was forced to close because the pictures and reception were inadequate to attract a commercially useful audience.) The BBC also pursued a policy of national coverage and by 1956 98 per cent of the country was able to receive television. This was achieved only by a massive redistribution of resources away from the rich south-east, where there were many television owners, to the more remote regions. A national service was an investment which could not at first have been made by the commercial companies.

### **Competition new and old**

It has been argued that commercial competition changed the BBC. Competition forced the Corporation to consider public wants more seriously. 'The BBC will have to abandon the ivory towers for the beaches! People prefer fun,' wrote one critic (*Daily Mail*, 15 February 1957). Peter Black comments that a kind of myth developed, based on an image of 'the energetic thrusting showbiz visionaries elbowing aside the complacent bureaucrats of the BBC, by presenting a series of audacious novelties that blew the stale air of monopoly out of television and sent the invigorating breezes of free enterprise whistling through it'.<sup>7</sup> Others have argued that subsequently broadcasting has been dominated by the need to maximize the audience.

Yet competition came to the BBC long before Independent Television was thought of. The decisive break with Reithian paternalism occurred during the war, when the General Forces Network was established. Similarly the BBC had always been obliged to prove that the size of its audience legitimized its receipt of the licence fee. Indeed the BBC had been subject to competition from foreign commercial stations since the 1930s. It was the challenge of Luxembourg which had broken the dismal Reithian Sunday on the radio. However unctuously it was defended, the BBC had abandoned the concept of planned programming considerably before the introduction of Independent Television, while programme-makers have always been most sensitive to the competition offered by colleagues. Anthony Smith has argued in *British Broadcasting* that 'Producers within the BBC were more often conscious of an internal competition within the different sections of the BBC.' This, he claimed, led in the 1960s to 'an enormous flowering of talent and inventiveness'. Such internal pressure had the greatest effect on standards and innovation within both authorities.

In addition the threat posed by commercial competition was more limited than its advocates have suggested. At first the two authorities fought a bitter ratings war. They soon



discovered that the public would watch anything in preference to a party political programme. (The parties reacted swiftly and ensured that these broadcasts were shown simultaneously on both channels.) When ITV offered the audience the Hallé Orchestra, the BBC's share of the audience rose. When the BBC offered the people *La Bohème*, the numbers watching fell to 2 per cent. However, both soon discovered the comforts of competition and the security provided by the dependability of the enemy's programming. It was found that documentaries and current events programmes achieved their maximum audience only if they were shown at the same time. As Burns commented, 'Competition now seems to be accepted as a fact of life for both the BBC and ITV, and is defended by both. There is one obvious reason for this; it makes life easier for them.' A rigidly conventional use of time and categories of programmes was reinforced by competition.

### Commerce and the audience

It is often assumed that ITV changed television because it won the battle for the audience. This is not the case. Indeed commercial television had little effect on the growth of the television audience, nor did it decimate the numbers watching BBC.

Between 1955 and 1956 the commercial companies struggled to acquire an audience. Howard Thomas wrote that by January 1956, 'The situation was very grim. The costs of running commercial television were enormous for the audience was simply not large enough to attract advertising revenue.'

However, the situation improved. In a well-publicized campaign in 1957 Sir Kenneth Clark was claiming a 79:21 preference for the commercial channel. In December of the same year, out of 539 programmes listed by TAM in the top ten ratings, 536 were from ITV and only 3 produced by the BBC. 'Once they had a choice', Black wrote, 'the working-class audience left the BBC at a pace that suggested ill will was more deeply entrenched than good.' The first *ATV Showbook* put the point more jubilantly: 'We've got the audience,' it proclaimed. Norman Collins said that the BBC would soon 'grind to a halt'.

Certainly the BBC panicked. *Ariel*, the staff magazine, became full of warlike metaphors about 'beating back the enemy' and getting into 'fighting formation'. As large numbers of staff left the Corporation for the higher salaries and more makeshift offices of the commercial companies, Sir Ian Jacob wrote, 'I doubt whether any organization in peacetime has been subject to comparable strain' (*Ariel*, 3, 1956).

Corporation officials became obsessed with maintaining a 30 per cent share of the audience. Television was typically being interpreted in terms of the audience distribution of radio. Furthermore its audience was being seen in terms of an obsolete distribution of the population between classes. According to this view, the commercial companies would concentrate on entertainment (like the Light Programme, which drew 68 per cent of the

audience), leaving more serious programming to the BBC (like the combined Home and Third services which drew 32 per cent of the audience).

The apparent collapse of the audience posed a dilemma. The BBC might be destroyed because its share of the audience would no longer justify the collection of a licence fee from all viewers. Or the BBC might be destroyed because it would be forced to emulate the commercial programmes.

However, the argument about which service had won the largest audience was confused, in the first place because the two authorities counted their audience in different ways. 'For us,' wrote Robert Silvey, the head of the BBC's audience research, 'it meant people, and for ITV it meant TV sets. Our method was based on questioning samples of the population about their previous day's viewing; ITV's on metered records of when TV sets in a sample of homes had been switched on.' Although both methods showed trends in viewing behaviour, they could not be directly compared.

Indeed the commercial companies had not 'won' a 70 per cent share of the total viewing audience as Clark had implied. Rather this was the proportion of those viewers who had purchased a new television set which could receive both channels. At first this was a tiny fraction of the total audience. Even as late as 1960 the ITA estimated in its annual report that fewer than 60 per cent of licence holders had two-channel sets. Given their considerable financial investment, it was hardly surprising that viewers with new sets at first preferred the novelty of commercial television. Nevertheless, throughout the period the BBC's total audience was over twice that of ITV.

Indeed the introduction of commercial television had no independent effect on the overall growth of the television audience.

As Table 5 shows this was fast but steady. The pattern of gradual growth was interrupted only once, when two years before the start of ITV the Coronation produced a dramatic rise in viewers. The BBC did not 'lose' an audience, nor did commercial choice increase the speed of audience growth.

### **Public service: private enterprise**

Commercial television in Britain was hardly revolutionary. Indeed it was carefully modelled on the BBC. The traditions of public service were inherited by the new authority.

The ITA was responsible for regulating the commercial stations and made no programmes. Like the BBC, ITV was licensed only for a limited period, a system which ensured that the whole of British broadcasting came under periodic review. Like the BBC it had a publicly appointed controlling board. 'The BBC triumphed', Peter Black wrote, 'because all of those chosen as members of the IBA might equally well have been BBC Governors.'

Table 5 *Growth of television audience*

<i>Year</i>	<i>No. of new TV licence holders</i>
1946–7	14,560
1947–8	57,000
1948–9	112,000
1949–50	344,000
1950–1	420,000
1951–2	685,319
1952–3	693,192
1953–4	1,110,439
1954–5	1,254,879
1955–6	1,235,827
1956–7	1,226,663
1957–8	1,123,747
1958–9	1,165,419

*Source:* BBC Handbooks (1946–59)

The new service was more limited than the BBC. It was banned from broadcasting its own opinions, and the injunction that it should observe ‘impartiality in the treatment of all controversial issues’ has been interpreted narrowly to imply a balance of views with in each programme. As Smith points out, the prohibitions ‘listed in the 1954 Act are broadly consistent with the general editorial policy of the BBC, but they have been used over the years to oblige independent TV not to do certain types of programme’. Hence ITV has been given less political independence than the BBC.

Thus Independent Television was made in the image of the BBC. Introduced after a controversy which *The Economist* called ‘a soufflé of high principles and politics’ (15 June 1954), which disguised a simple profit motive, commercial television was nevertheless formed as a public service.

### **Commerce, finance, and television**

Indeed television was so expensive it had always seemed likely that it would have to be financed commercially. ‘Had there been no war in 1939’, Briggs remarks, ‘it is conceivable that commercial TV would have come to Britain fifteen years before it did.’ Even in the limited experimental stage, television was an exorbitantly expensive medium. In 1937 a BBC *Handbook* had estimated that an hour of television cost twelve times as much to produce as

the most expensive programme on the radio. Even Reith, in his evidence to the Selsdon Committee in 1934, claimed that he had 'no objection in principle to the sponsor system and we do in fact do something which is near to that and might do it in the future'. Sir William Haley wrote in 1945, 'Television will cost more than the Corporation's usual sources of funds can easily provide.' Beveridge had rejected sponsorship, but was not hostile in principle to some commercial involvement in television.

The BBC itself had been pressing for some kind of commercial financing of television since the 1930s, partly because it was felt that business interests could have little serious effect on what was seen as a trivial means of entertainment. Within the BBC, television was regarded as an extension of the Light Programme. As such it might be expensive, but it could hardly be important. 'In terms of the ethos which had been cultivated within the BBC during the fifties', wrote Burns, 'Light Entertainment remained an unfortunate necessity, its marginal character inescapably perpetuated in the adjective tagged to it.' Commerce, television, and programme policy had been closely linked since the 1930s.

### **New programmes and the new style**

Perhaps the most important innovation which ITV introduced was the change of mood which it brought to broadcasting. The atmosphere of the new companies, owned and run by showmen like Val Parnell and the Grade brothers, was quite different from the stifling solemnity of the BBC bureaucracy. 'It was more like Klondyke than Maida Vale,' wrote Howard Thomas. When Thomas went to see Lew Grade at ATV about new programme ideas he would be met by a cloud of cigar smoke, and Grade would throw open a drawer bulging with receipts and bills. The haggling would then begin. Describing Parnell and Grade negotiating a new contract for ATV Thomas wrote, 'They sat like boxers pausing between the rounds of a heavyweight championship.'

Once ITV had begun broadcasting, it no longer had to fight the moral scruples of the establishment and its first priority was to capture an audience. 'Variety,' claimed the first *ATV Showbook*, 'although accumulating the largest number of viewers, has been taken to task by critics of commercial television who have asked for "more cultural programmes and less airy frolics".' The article continued, 'Many will agree with ATV chief executive Val Parnell when he says there is a lot of culture to be gained from watching a great clown performing.' However, it was not the big top or the *Commedia Dell'Arte* which drew the ATV audience, but rather the giveaway shows, Double your Money, Take your Pick, and Beat the Clock. The Labour MP, Tom Driberg, compared the audience's howl of laughter at one of these shows to that of the circus crowd in ancient Rome (*New Statesman*, 25 December 1959).

Independent Television did not, however, 'soundly beat the BBC at its own game', as a *Daily Mail* critic claimed in 1956. BBC drama, serials, and documentaries were consistently preferred to those of ITV. Consequently in 1956 news, documentaries, classical music,

current events, and drama on ITV were cut by one-third. 'A craven definition of "serious"', Black claims, 'killed off promising programmes whose only offence was that though entertainment, they were a novelty.'

ITV's most important contribution to television was to develop a format for the news. The BBC bulletin had been read by an unseen newscaster accompanied by still photographs. Cardiff and Scannell argue that this failure

left a gaping hole in the very centre of television programme output. The function of a daily news service is not simply the continuous up to the minute monitoring, processing and defining of immediate national and international news events. It also serves to define the currency and topicality of events and issues for current affairs programmes.<sup>8</sup>

Independent Television News attracted an immense audience. It used journalists as news-readers, allowed them to write their own scripts, and showed them on the screen.

Robin Day, one of ITN's first newscasters, commented in his memoirs that 'The man on the screen had a further task, to win the professional confidence of his colleagues.' ITN developed television journalism in new directions, despite the limitations imposed upon it by the Television Act. The obligation to exercise balance proved particularly difficult. 'Any problems?' Day once asked the news director. 'Yes,' Cox replied bitterly, 'a call from a chap called Pontius Pilate who says his case has not been properly put.' The success of the ITN approach in turn provoked the BBC into improving its own news services.

However, ITV also inherited many traditions from the BBC. One disgruntled critic claimed, 'The BBC has precedents for everything, for handling a monarch's abdication, a State Opening of Parliament or a boy scouts' jamboree.'<sup>9</sup> The opening years of television seem little more than an extension of the wireless, where history was relentlessly marked by a succession of royal events (with outside coverage).

More significantly the BBC solved many of the political and social dilemmas that confronted television. The BBC showed the first televised election, and established the rules governing politicians' access to television, while the practical consequences of 'neutrality' and 'balance' in a visual medium were developed by a new generation of BBC producers and presenters. Goldie employed several young Labour ex-MPs defeated in the 1951 general election to make current events programmes. Later she claimed her choice was vindicated because Mayhew, Taverne, and Wyatt moved from the left to the middle and right of the political spectrum. These shifts in attitude might also demonstrate the power of the ethic of consensus which came to dominate television journalism. The commercial companies simply took over the conventions developed within the BBC. Both, wrote Stuart Hood, 'interpreted impartiality as the acceptance of that segment of opinion which constitutes parliamentary consensus. Opinion that falls outside that consensus has difficulty in finding

expression.' Hood suggests that the median of acceptable opinion may shift, but the consensus, once arrived at, is always shared by both companies.

The BBC had also set precedents for the solution of technical dilemmas in television journalism before ITV started. New rhetorics of documentary and current affairs coverage were established. At first most cameramen had been trained in the cinema, and had little experience of journalism. 'In those early days', one producer wrote, 'I often discarded glamorous pictures of cherry orchards, or flocks of bleating lambs, or children dancing in playgrounds because, though improbably useful in a travelogue, they did nothing to a study of, say, the relationship of Yugoslavia to the USSR.'<sup>10</sup> She concluded that as pictures would always override words a style had to be found which ensured that they would reinforce rather than distract from the meaning of a piece. It was also recognized that the use of film raised problems of authenticity. Viewers could easily be led to believe that a film taken in the past actually portrayed events happening in the present. One solution was to use someone who had helped to make the film as the programme presenter. Reviewing the BBC magazine series *Foreign Correspondent* in the *Listener* (May 1959), Goldie had written that they

we were using film but we were not trying to make films. We wanted the programmes to be dominated by the personality of the commentator. . . . We were all feeling our way but when the series finished we felt that we had hit on a new form that had come to stay in television. The key to the new form is the use of film to illustrate a personal experience.

This form was quite opposed to the style of the British documentary movement, in which the film purported to represent an authoritative reality, rather than any personal view.

These innovations and cautious explorations of the specific properties and opportunities of televised politics and current affairs were made well before ITV started. They solved dilemmas that were common to any television service. ITV did not challenge or alter the rules established by the BBC; it merely helped to develop them further.

### **End of a monopoly: vulgar new world**

The introduction of Independent Television did not mark such a decisive break with the BBC. Rather the brash new companies owed more to the Corporation than has usually been recognized. The BBC had already begun to change in fundamental ways before ITV was started. The commercial station provided a stimulus for the maturing of a national television service. Sir Hugh Greene claimed that dramatic changes were to come later in the 1960s, and these were as much to do with a shift in the political climate as with any administrative innovations.

This is not to deny that the BBC had a radically different manner and organization from Independent Television. Like the British Raj, the BBC combined privilege and moral purpose. It was a world in which ‘unsoundness’ was a major crime. Independent Television provided an alternative source of employment for dissidents and had no deadweight of custom or dignity. Personnel moved continually and freely between the two authorities by the 1960s.

However, commercial television was also modelled on and limited by the BBC. Originally intended as a political counterweight to what was seen as the BBC’s ‘red’ bias, ITV was as vulnerable to political pressure. The BBC depended on public support for the legitimacy of its licence fee, as ITV depended on it for advertising revenue.

It has often been claimed that ITV was a vulgar debaucher of cultural standards. In the pursuit of profit it merely pandered to the lowest common denominator of public taste. More recently a far more subtle case has been advanced which is not so crudely anti-commercial. This claims that ITV was rather an energizing, populist force which gave expression to working-class culture.

### Notes

- 1 J. C. W. Reith, *House of Lords* (22 May 1952), H. L. 176: 1,293–451.
- 2 Quoted in J. Harris, *William Beveridge* (Oxford, Clarendon, 1977), p. 311.
- 3 Captain L. P. S. Orr MP, *House of Commons Debates* (22 June 1951), 529:327.
- 4 H. Fairlie, ‘The BBC’ in H. Swynnerton Thomas (ed.), *The Establishment: A Symposium* (London, New English Library, 1962).
- 5 G. Wyndham Goldie, *Facing the Nation: Television and Politics 1936–1976* (London, Bodley Head, 1977), p. 45.
- 6 ‘Television staff policy’, *BBC Written Archives* (1955).
- 7 P. Black, *The Mirror in the Corner* (London, Hutchinson, 1972), p. 115.
- 8 P. Scannell, ‘The social eye of television’, *Media, Culture and Society*, 1, 1 (1979).
- 9 H. Fairlie, ‘TV: idiot box’, *Encounter* (August 1959).
- 10 G. Wyndham Goldie, ‘TV report’, *Listener* (23 October 1968).

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*Class, taste, and profit*

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Post-war affluence was measured in consumer durables. Cars, refrigerators, and washing machines made it easier to do what had always been done. Television changed people's social life and habits. Commercial television was believed to alter their aspirations and values as well.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s television was central to a debate about supposed changes in the British class structure. The growth of a mass television audience and the setting-up of a commercial service were seen as agents of a revolution that was eroding class distinction and increasing social mobility. Television has more often been seen as a destructive than as a creative force. In the 1950s many regarded it as a threat to traditional ways of life, and hence to the basis of traditional political loyalties.

In 1962 the Pilkington Report summed up this debate. The Director General, Sir Hugh Greene, later called the report 'the most important piece of work on the purposes of broadcasting which has appeared in this or any other country'.<sup>1</sup> Pilkington attempted to establish the criteria for producing – and judging – good broadcasting. In fact the report was very much a product of its time, and was constrained by current sociological fashions.

### **The myth of the disappearing working class**

During the 1950s it was argued that affluence was destroying the working class. The general elections of 1955 and 1959 seemed to support the view that there were no longer two nations: fewer and fewer people were prepared even to support the Labour Party. Two complementary explanations were put forward. According to the first, as the working class had become richer it was actually disappearing through assimilation into the middle class. According to the second, a working class had continued to exist but prosperity had undermined an awareness of its own interests: capitalism was successfully eradicating the consciousness (though not the reality) of class.



The first view was particularly popular among right-wing Labour politicians (who used it to justify an attempt to remove socialism from the party's constitution). 'The steady upgrading of the working class,' wrote Anthony Crosland in his book *The Future of Socialism*, 'both occupationally and still more in terms of political and social aspirations, renders Labour's one-class image increasingly inappropriate.' It was also widely held by social scientists who invented the inelegant term 'embourgeoisement' to describe the alleged process. As Butler and Rose wrote after the 1959 general election, 'It is more than ever possible to speak of the Conservatives as the country's usual majority party . . . the Labour Party has to face the fact that its support is being eroded by the impact of age and social change.'

Between 1951 and 1958 real wages rose by 20 per cent. The proportion of manual workers who owned their own homes rose from 32 per cent to 39 per cent in the four years before 1962.<sup>2</sup> Between 1951 and 1964 the number of television sets rose from 1 million to 13 million. Indeed as televisions were clearly not useful, the widespread ownership of sets merely appeared to confirm what Crosland called the 'pubs, pools and prostitutes' view of the working class which was seen to 'waste all its higher income on alcohol, tobacco, gambling and fun . . . if not actually women'.<sup>3</sup>

During the same period working-class habits also changed. People went on more holidays, went to the cinema less frequently, began drinking more at home and less at pubs. As these goods and habits had previously been the prerogative of higher social classes, it was assumed that their use also entailed middle- and upper-class views and beliefs.

The second explanation of the decay of the working class depended on the centrality of culture. The rituals which were a source of strength to working-class life were disappearing, partly (so it was argued) because of the homogenizing influence of television. Paradoxically working-class culture was celebrated just as it seemed to be about to vanish. Indeed its condition was detailed by a generation of academics whose origins were working-class, but all of whom had been upwardly mobile.

'To live in the working class', wrote Richard Hoggart, 'is to belong to an all-pervading culture, one in some ways as formalized and stylized as any that is attributed to the upper classes.'<sup>4</sup> Jackson and Marsden in their book on working-class life argued that two and a half centuries of urban life 'have established distinct working-class styles of living with very real values of their own. Values which are perhaps essential to society and which do not flourish that strongly in other reaches of society.'<sup>5</sup> In a chapter headed 'An acceptance of the working-class life', they remarked that obliterating these values and way of life 'can be so quick in a technological society . . . the mass media, the central planning office, the bulldozers are all characteristic instruments of change'. In a related series of studies Wilmott and Young compared the warm closeness of a Bethnal Green working-class community with the more isolated life of a new suburb. In the East End the emphasis was on the informal collective life

and the extended family, the pubs and the open air market. 'There is a sort of bantering warmth in public,' they claimed, which in the new suburb, Woodford, was reserved for the family home. There seemed to be more uniformity in gardens, attitudes, and behaviour in Woodford than in the East End. 'Maybe uniformity is one of the prices we have to pay for sociability in a more mobile society,' they concluded.<sup>6</sup>

Television was important because it was seen as replacing old communal forms of leisure with isolated and standardized entertainment. 'In many parts of life', Hoggart argued, 'mass production has brought good: culturally the mass produced makes it harder for the good to be recognized.' Indeed for writers like Hoggart culture was the most important aspect of a society's achievement.

Hoggart applied F. R. Leavis's concern with the moral quality of elite literary culture to a broader problem of working-class life. For Leavis, Annan wrote, 'The analysis of the text is only important in so far as it reveals the profundity or morality of the writer's moral consciousness.'<sup>7</sup> Leavis was concerned to evaluate the purpose of literature. 'Where there is not in the literary critical sense a significant contemporary culture', he wrote, '*the mind* is not fully alive.'<sup>8</sup> Hoggart was concerned to judge modern working-class culture. He concluded that 'Most mass entertainments are in the end what D. H. Lawrence described as "anti-life". They are full of corrupt brightness and improper appeals and moral evasions.' Progress had been reduced to material improvement: 'It only offered an infinite perspective of increasingly good times. Technicolour TV, all smelling, all touching, all tasting TV.'

Thus the Pilkington Report was the product of two contemporary concerns: that the working class was being absorbed into the middle class, and that working-class culture was decaying because of the industrialization of leisure. Raymond Williams wrote that 'From 1956 to 1962 there was an intense development of ideas in the field of culture and communication, and by the time of the Pilkington Report this had reached the level of open and conventional politics.'<sup>9</sup> The committee had been asked to review the development of television. In fact they did much more, producing a report which judged the nation's culture. Television, the report argued, was 'one of the major long-term factors that would shape the moral and mental attitudes, and the values of our society'.

Yet the working class did not disappear, and neither did working-class culture. There is little evidence that people lose a sense of their social identity simply because they become comparatively better off. Indeed the really remarkable feature of the period was not affluence – the rise in living standards looks far less impressive when it is compared with the growth in other European countries – but full employment. For the first time there was work for everyone, and it gave working-class culture, taste, and life a confidence which it had rarely had before.

The Pilkington Report depended on a sentimentalization of an earlier 'golden age', just as Hoggart and Wilmott and Young had before it. Indeed it demonstrates a puritanical distaste

for the effects of improved material conditions. Although its concern with the influence of television on social and cultural behaviour is important, the standards by which it judged the mass media were based on false premises about the nature of working-class life.

### **The power of the media**

The Pilkington Report also depended on a crude view of the power of the media to influence individual behaviour. Advertising, and in particular its newest and most dramatic form, the television commercial, was regarded as immensely persuasive. The effect of advertising was dramatized by the contrast with the war, when advertising had not only been limited, but also pursued rather novel goals. A cartoon by Fougasse in 1942 wryly made the point: it compared the huge pre-war billboard extolling the public to ‘Eat more and more Meatio’ with the tiny wartime poster which read, ‘Save Meatio, don’t use more than you need!’<sup>10</sup> In this context the post-austerity explosion of advertising amazed the public, and academics and politicians became very sensitive to its effects.

Television advertising in particular was regarded as sinister. It was often equated with ‘brain-washing’ techniques which had been exposed during the Korean war. ‘It may well be’, wrote Daniel Bell in the *Listener* (December 1956), ‘that our fears are excessive, that the pliability of the consumer, like that of the “indoctrinated” communist youth, is an exaggerated fact.’ The fashion for ‘motivation research’ seemed to suggest that advertisements relied on an appeal to people’s irrational and subconscious feelings in order to sell goods. The model of the consumer as a rational hedonist was replaced by another in which many goods were purchased not for their intrinsic worth or usefulness, but in an attempt to assuage anxieties. Marketing, dependent on the ‘eight hidden needs’ (most of which could be reduced to one – sex), was claimed to have dramatic effects. ‘The ability of advertisers to contact millions of us simultaneously through television has given them the power to do good or evil on a scale never before possible,’ one persuader put it.<sup>11</sup> Leavis wrote that ‘a new brand of applied psychology . . . and a highly specialized profession’ had been developed. ‘Years of carefully recorded and tabulated experiment [led advertisers] to develop their appeal in the confidence that the average member of the public will respond like an automaton.’<sup>12</sup> Television advertising, which reached people in the defenceless privacy of their own homes, seemed to assume that consumers were unable to introspect sufficiently to understand their own motives.

The working class were felt to be the group most vulnerable to the ambitions of advertisers. ‘There is one kind of person who seems particularly responsive to advertising: the man or woman who is moving up from one class to another,’ Mark Abrams argued in a broadcast in 1956. ‘These people – and there are an incredible number in Britain – have to shed their old

buying habits and acquire new ones. The class-destroying function of modern advertising is cumulative,' he suggested:

The initial effect is to encourage people to want to buy consumer goods formerly enjoyed by their social betters. As they achieve this and become more socially mobile, advertising and television provide them with knowledge that enables them to fill their new role.<sup>13</sup>

Indeed the first television commercials seemed to confirm this view of the direct impact of the media on behaviour. Shops almost immediately sold out of the advertised goods, and jubilant market researchers discovered that the public recalled the commercials long after they had first been shown. But this was only a temporary effect.

Indeed later research has shown how complex the relationship between media message and audience behaviour is. The public is not a passive empty box merely waiting to be filled with the injunctions of advertisers. How people react to what they see is determined by their class, age, and the beliefs they already hold. Nor is the public subconscious so easily manipulated as many assumed. As one contemporary market researcher pointed out, surveys which concluded that housewives did not like macaroni which cooked to a wet sticky mass because wet sticky masses aroused sexual guilt in them were not treated with the scepticism they deserved.<sup>14</sup> Some critics reacted cautiously to the power of advertisements: 'I cannot think so poorly of British Fathers', wrote Tom Driberg in the *New Statesman* (20 December 1958), 'as to accept the diagnosis proclaimed by one ITV advertiser last week, "Every daddy deserves a Brylcreem home dispenser for Christmas".' However, most critics believed it to be overwhelming. Advertising executives were credited with a power they would have been delighted to exercise, but which was far in excess of their rather unpredictable performance.

This overestimation of the manipulative power of the media influenced the Pilkington Report. It led to a crude view of the public – particularly the working-class audience – as passive, gullible, and misled.

### **Real and false wants**

The Pilkington Report dismissed expressed public preferences as unreal and the product of commercial manipulation. A Labour Party report on advertising written in 1962 developed some of these arguments. Advertising, it claimed, could not be defended by the assertion that it merely reflected the times. For, in order to make advertisements, individuals were obliged to make decisions. In so far as advertisers determined what was shown they were responsible for their choices. Some people, the report argued, had claimed that advertising 'reinforces attitudes of materialism, only too prevalent in society'. In the committee's opinion,

This charge is probably the opposite of the truth: for it seems more likely that what advertising does is to interfere with the appreciation of material goods to the extent that it substitutes for a genuine assessment or perception of their qualities, vague sentiments and fantasies.

The choices that were expressed under these conditions were consequently not 'real'.

The Pilkington Report's assessment of commercial television depended on a similar view of the exploitation of working-class false consciousness for profit. The argument was based on two premises. First, that the public's expressed choice was not a real one because it had not been offered the entire range of possible options from which to choose. It made its choice of television programmes from a culture already limited by the imperatives of profit. Second, the public was in itself limited: the choices it made were deformed by the inadequacies of its education, wealth, and leisure. The working class has, of course, been particularly damaged in these ways.

The report's attitude towards cultural choice was particularly clear in its discussion of entertainment. ITV defended itself by arguing that its programmes were popular. Pilkington replied that

to give the public what it wants is a misleading phrase . . . it has the appearance of an appeal to democratic principle, but the appearance is deceptive. It is in fact patronizing and arrogant, in that it claims to know what the public is but defines it as no more than the mass audience, and it claims to know what it wants, but limits its choice to the average of experience.

The commercial companies suggested that there was no need to consider entertainment as it was so unimportant. However, for Pilkington, the individual programme was analogous to the text for the literary critic. As such it was as essential to judge 'trivial entertainment' as more serious programmes. Pilkington found most entertainment programmes unsatisfactory.

However, as Crosland pointed out, it was patronizing and perhaps unwise to dismiss expressed public wants as irrelevant. He argued that the range of newspapers and television programmes was 'still considerable, certainly wide enough to offer genuine comparison'. Indeed most people, for most of the time, chose the escapist, the diverting, or the trivial. Policy should not ignore these needs, but should also seek to encourage minority interests.

The Pilkington Committee's fears that the public was passive led it to con-sider audience preferences as little more than the expression of commercial manipulation. Consequently the report became insensitive to public taste. Indeed it endorsed the BBC's popular music policy when this was clearly out of touch with what people wanted to hear, as the success of the pirate stations soon demonstrated.

### Entertainment, politics, and advertising

The Pilkington Committee was romantically committed to a concept of folk culture. Its emphasis on the importance of the ‘authenticity’ of cultural products meant that many other considerations were ignored. For instance, television entertainment programmes often implicitly supported particular political values. Yet the report’s emphasis on the cultural purposes of programmes has meant that long-term political consequences have rarely been discussed. In addition the report depended on a series of misleading images about the nature of working-class life and culture which affected its tone and distorted its recommendations. Often Pilkington seemed perilously close to despising what was popular and entertaining, and approving only that which was rigorous and demanding.

This was unfortunate, because the report’s identification of programmes as the central focus for any assessment of broadcasting is crucial. Moreover, its recognition of the structural effects of advertising on the quality of programmes is original and shrewd, and still pertinent a generation later. In addition, attempts by Pilkington to mitigate the impact of advertising by giving the third channel to the BBC, and by strengthening the power of the ITA over the companies were important factors in improving the commercial service. In particular, the report, which had been wonderfully orchestrated by Sir Hugh Greene, also gave the BBC the *élan* and confidence which were the basis for its most exciting expansion in the 1960s.<sup>15</sup> For the first time, the Corporation attempted to make broadcasting something like a quality popular newspaper. This is perhaps the most challenging model for a national broadcasting service.

### Notes

- 1 Sir Hugh Greene, ‘The future of broadcasting in Britain’, Granada Guildhall Lecture (1972), p. 24.
- 2 M. Pinto Duschinsky, ‘Bread and circuses: the Conservatives in office 1951–64’ in V. Bogdanor and R. Skidelsky (eds), *The Age of Affluence* (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1970), p. 55.
- 3 C. A. R. Crosland, ‘The mass media’, *Encounter* (November 1962).
- 4 R. Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy* (London, Chatto & Windus, 1957), p. 16.
- 5 B. Jackson and D. Marsden, *Education and the Working Class* (London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962), p. 223.
- 6 P. Wilmott and M. D. Young, *Family and Class in a London Suburb* (London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1960), p. 129.
- 7 N. Annan, ‘Love among the moralists’, *Encounter* (February 1960), p. 37.
- 8 F. R. Leavis, *The Common Pursuit* (London, Chatto & Windus, 1952), p. 192.
- 9 R. Williams, *Communications*, revised edn (London, Chatto & Windus, 1966), p. 10.
- 10 Fougasse (pseud. C. K. Bird), *The Changing Face of Britain* (London, Methuen, 1950), p. 15.

- 11 V. Packard, *The Hidden Persuaders* (Harlow, Longman, 1957), p. 259.
- 12 F. R. Leavis and D. Thompson, *Culture and Environment* (London, Chatto & Windus, 1953), p. 48.
- 13 M. Abrams, 'Advertising', *Listener* (15 December 1956), p. 1,089.
- 14 M. Abrams, 'Motivation research', *Advertising Quarterly* (November 1959), p. 311.
- 15 See M. Tracey, *A Variety of Lives: The Biography of Sir Hugh Greene* (London, Bodley Head, 1983).

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*How the audience is made*

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Commercial television produces audiences not programmes. Advertisers, in purchasing a few seconds of television time, are actually buying viewers by the thousand. The price they pay is determined by the number of people who can be expected to be watching when their advert is shown. Hence advertisers regard programmes merely as the means by which audiences are delivered to them. The sequence of programmes in any evening, week, or season reflects the quest of commercial customers to get the largest or most appropriate public they can. 'The spot is the packaging,' wrote a market researcher in *Advertising Quarterly*, 'the product inside the package is an audience.' These are the realities which help to determine what kinds of pro-grammes are made, when they are shown, and who sees them.

Commercial television was introduced in the 1950s because it was claimed that it would bring competition into broadcasting, and make the service more responsive to popular demands. The Independent Television channel was supposed to break the narrow élitism of the BBC's cultural policy. Indeed once it had been given a regional structure, it was also supposed to promote provincial culture and oppose the BBC's metropolitan bias. Finally, commercial television, its advocates claimed, would be less vulnerable to political pressure. Unlike the BBC, its finances would be independent of official control.

Few of these hopes were fully realized. The allocation of the franchise areas in which commercial companies were given the right to broadcast was designed to produce a system in which four (later five) of the largest and wealthiest regions made most of the programmes for the national network. The smaller companies made most of their programmes for local consumption; only a few of their products were to be shown nationally.

The first commitment of the commercial companies was to make a profit. Hence they were concerned to minimize the financial risks involved in making programmes. The smaller regions, whose audiences were not so attractive to advertisers, could not afford to invest in expensive programmes unless they were guaranteed a national showing. Similarly



the large networking companies needed to be able to show their programmes in every region in order to cover their costs. Consequently decisions about which programmes were to be networked became centralized.

This centralization was formally established when the Independent Television Companies Association (ITCA) was set up in 1971. This decided which programmes were to be shown on the national network, and how much the smaller companies had to pay towards the costs of the major programme producers. The smaller companies, however, complained that the ITCA was dominated by the five major programme networking companies.

### **The Independent Broadcasting Authority**

Yet British 'commercial' television was not merely a product of market forces, If financial pressures were the only influence, the programme-makers' aim would always be simply to reach the largest possible audience for the smallest amount of money.

In practice this would have meant a diet of American soap opera, variety shows, filmed series, quizzes, and chat shows, based on proven formulae, endlessly repeated. 'Minority' programming would cater only for groups defined primarily in terms of their consumption patterns. Current affairs would have been confined to news bulletins, and advertising spots would have been longer, more frequent, and more intrusive. In addition, even more programmes would have been bought from abroad – particularly the USA – and fewer programmes made in Britain or directed at a British audience. Commercial broadcasting did not develop all of these features in Britain, because of the framework of public regulations within which it was obliged to operate. Nevertheless, these pressures remain the dominant features of a commercial service.

The Independent Broadcasting Authority (IBA) exerted a major influence on commercial television. The powers of the authority were widened following the report of the Pilkington Committee (1962), but the most public job of the IBA was to license television franchises, and to reallocate these periodically. The authority was also required to ensure 'balanced programming', 'due impartiality' in the treatment of controversial issues, and a high quality in programme production as a whole. To enforce its recommendations the IBA could determine the broadcasting schedule, prohibit the transmission of particular programmes, or even revoke the franchises of offending companies. In addition, the IBA monitored and controlled the amount, timing, quality, and content of advertisements shown on commercial television.

When commercial television started in Britain in 1956, there was little idea of what form it would take. 'All we had in the beginning', recalled Sir Robert Fraser, the first Director General of the ITA, 'was an Act of Parliament, an untested authority, a little prefab in a mews

by Marble Arch, and a bit of money we had to pay back.’<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, the new controlling authority quickly developed a commitment to public service. Thus in the first months of broadcasting, as Sir Kenneth Clark recalled, the IBA threatened to make current affairs programmes itself to counter a proposal to abandon such programmes by the commercial companies. The determination of the authority to maintain minority programming in peak viewing time was similarly demonstrated when it came to reallocate franchises. In 1967 some of the original commercial franchises were not renewed. As a result, programme scheduling on ITV had an important though secondary goal, that of securing the reallocation of franchises. ‘Advertisers understand that current affairs and news programming is a condition of the survival of the commercial television companies,’ wrote one advertising executive recently. ‘It is no good complaining about them.’<sup>2</sup>

The IBA also intervened in the construction of the programme schedules, requiring that one-third of all material broadcast by commercial TV companies should be ‘serious non-fiction, sensibly distributed over the week as a whole in appropriate times’.<sup>3</sup> Without this intervention, a service which many people relied on as their primary source of news might have carried very little current affairs coverage.

The IBA’s intervention also helped to maintain a wider range of cultural output than would otherwise have been the case. In 1956 ‘serious programming’ accounted for 19 per cent of the companies’ schedules. This rose to 26 per cent in 1959, and 36 per cent in 1965, a proportion which was maintained. However, official figures were inflated by the growing number of programmes which were classed as serious documentaries, but which were on entertainment topics (such as Alan Whicker’s series). In addition, there were an increasing number of consumer-oriented programmes (on cars, holidays, and gardening, for example), some of which scarcely qualified for their official classification as ‘serious and informative’. Nevertheless, programming on commercial television undoubtedly included more serious material because of the IBA’s influence, and many of these programmes gained large audiences. The most striking example was ITN’s News at Ten, which was enormously innovative in its presentation of news and which regularly featured in the IBA’s yearly Top Twenty’ popularity ratings.

The Authority was also important in maintaining the standards of entertainment on commercial television. It limited the number of cheap American imports and the frequency with which programmes were repeated. The IBA also assisted the smaller regional companies by charging the more profitable regions a higher rent for the use of the television transmitter which it owned, and thus made them subsidize the rental of the poorer companies. In addition, through its position on the committee which decided which programmes were shown on the central network, it ensured that some of the regional programmes were shown nationally.

## Regions and audiences

The Television Act, 1954, had not specified how commercial television was to be organized. It had laid down no principles to guide the allocation of contracts. When commercial companies began to submit proposals to the ITA they suggested many different ways of dividing commercial broadcasting between competitors. Thus some contractors offered to provide particular kinds of programmes, all the light entertainment, or all the music; others proposed to make the programmes for particular times of day, 6–9 pm or 3–7 pm. However, Sir Robert Fraser decided that the system should be based on regional companies. In this way, he intended to prohibit the growth of a centralized monopoly based on London, and to ‘give real creative power to the regions’.

Yet the principle of the federal structure seemed threatened from the very start. During the first two years commercial television was so expensive to run, reached such a small audience, and was so unprofitable that there was little interest in the smaller regions. It was during this disastrous period that Roy Thomson acquired Scottish Television at a very low cost. It was only when this company overcame its initial difficulties that the other regional services began to develop. Thomson, famous for having said that owning a commercial station was like having a licence to print money, soon made Scottish Television profitable. ‘I like monopolies’, he said, ‘when I operate them.’<sup>4</sup>

Regional commercial broadcasting has survived, but in a form that makes sense in economic rather than cultural terms. Thus Tyneside and Teesside have little in common apart from geographical proximity. Yet they were given a combined television station because only the joint purchasing power of their audience was sufficient to make up a marketing unit. A more serious case was that of Harlech Television, supposedly a Welsh station, but actually required, for commercial reasons, to cater for a large English audience as well. It has been argued that some regional television stations, for example Border Television, may have strengthened, or even created, a sense of local identity. However, most of the regions have no real justification except in marketing terms. Apart from London, television regions have not even approximately coincided with local authority areas. This has at least inhibited the discussions of local political issues.

The regionalism of commercial television appears less firmly rooted in popular needs than in the convenience of the market.

Indeed the most important response by the commercial companies to regional differences within Britain was to identify and sell distinctive characteristics in marketing terms. ‘Granada has the skilled workers: surveys prove it!’ read an advertisement in a 1959 trade magazine. ‘Westward where women cook,’ read another in *Campaign* in 1962. In 1979 Southern Television was pointing out that its A, B, and C1 housewives cook, and have time to be *femmes fatales* afterwards (*Campaign*, 5 July 1979). The differences between the habits and

tastes of the various regional audiences became an essential feature of sales campaigns. In 1962 one writer claimed that 'The television regions made scientific selling more possible than ever before.'<sup>5</sup> New products could be launched in regions where they were most likely to be successful, and advertising campaigns could be tested by pilot surveys in a particular region. In the same way regional television meant that additional advertising pressure could be applied in any area where sales were slumping. The most important effect of the regional structure of commercial television was to change the marketing map of Britain.

### Franchises and owners

The cost of developing commercial television was at first so great that franchises had to be given to syndicates which had the resources to undertake the necessary capital investment. This brought an important change in the kind of people who controlled broadcasting. Hitherto in the BBC responsibility had been vested in professional administrators whose social origins, training, and attitudes reflected the 'public service' philosophy of the Corporation. Independent television introduced a new type of executive, business-oriented and entrepreneurial, geared to the commercial criteria of the sponsors. Thus while the BBC was directed by Sir William Haley, who had started his career as a journalist on the *Manchester Guardian*, and who became editor of *The Times*, Associated Television's first director was Lew Grade, a show business and theatre impresario.

By the time that the franchises were reallocated in 1967, commercial television had become highly profitable, and consequently the justification for allowing it to be controlled by speculative capital no longer held good. Indeed such vast profits had been made from a publicly owned asset, the air waves, that the prospect of their reallocation created a flood of applications. There was an atmosphere reminiscent of Klondyke gold fever. Many of Britain's major corporations financed 'prospecting' companies composed of theatre managers and entertainment moguls spiced with a few peers or eminent members of the BBC. Although changes were made in the new franchises, instead of widening control, the redistribution, in practice, merely consolidated the power of the great media empires.

This pattern continued until the 1980s; the government encouraged the oligopolistic tendencies of the broadcasting industry itself – in the name, of course, of freedom. If one contradiction of this period was that free market rhetoric was accompanied by interventionist practice, another was that talk about a media market-place was accompanied by its virtual eradication. Technological change, with its requirement of long-term investment and large-scale capitalization, produced a bureaucratic jungle of profit-taking conglomerates which now own huge shares in all the media which the public consumes.

By 1990 the small number of corporate owners were not competitive in a sense that could be conceivably expected to produce an improved product: but their financial rivalry undoubtedly imposed pressure to produce a cheaper one. That meant an almost inevitable lowering of standards: it is cheaper to buy in agency news than to send a reporter to the scene, it is cheaper to buy in internationalized soap opera than to make your own drama, and so on.

The victims of media concentration are variety, creativity, and quality: while the future proliferation of broadcasting channels in the hands of a shrinking band of operators is certain to make matters worse.

### **Ownership and control of television**

However, the control of commercial television companies could not simply be equated with ownership. Those who actually produced commercial television programmes enjoyed a significant degree of autonomy. But, most important of all, the pressure of market forces imposed powerful constraints on what could and could not be broadcast. These operated irrespective of the formal ownership of commercial television. In a study of the way in which programming is determined in the USA, Wolf argued that ownership does not explain the differences in programming between stations. 'It may be', he suggested,

that those who saw such influences labored under a false analogy between the small town newspaper editor who may have shaped every word in his paper, and the television corporate executive, who according to the analogy controlled what was shown on the air.<sup>6</sup>

Indeed he concluded that in the USA the more diversely owned companies were less likely to take the networked programmes, particularly the news, current affairs, and documentaries, and more likely to replace them with old movies, old quiz shows, or old operas. They did this simply because of the pressure to attract the largest possible audience.

The economic and social organization of broadcasting is very different in Britain from that which Wolf describes in the USA. There, the more diversely owned companies were the smaller and less successful ones, which were more vulnerable to market pressures. Nevertheless, the inevitable pursuit of profit within a commercial system must have some similar consequences for the programming decisions which can be made in any country. Market forces operate as a continual limiting pressure on any commercial broadcasting system. Yet it is also clear that more socially diverse patterns of ownership could be an important factor in creating the conditions for more adventurous and varied programming.

### **The audience that advertisers want**

The most important pressure on television scheduling and programme-making is that of advertising expenditure. If television companies sell audiences, what kinds of audiences do advertisers want, and how are they packaged to attract sales? Indeed how does the real purpose of producing audiences for advertisers affect the apparent purpose of producing programmes for audience consumption?

The American system of programme sponsorship, in which advertisers pay for individual programmes, was rejected when commercial television started in Britain on the grounds that it gave advertisers direct power over programme content. Instead only 'spot advertising' was permitted. Advertisers could buy time slots only between or within programmes. At first, advertisements were limited to an average of six minutes per hour. Later, when it was seen that this led to an accumulation of advertisements in peak viewing times, which had above average amounts of advertising, it was decided to limit advertisements to no more than seven minutes in any one hour.

The decision to adopt restricted spot advertising had been hailed as a victory for public service broadcasting. 'The prohibition of sponsorship was an inspiration of the Television Act', declared Fraser, 'since it established the supremacy of the editorial principle.'<sup>7</sup> Spot advertisements were compared with newspaper advertising. They were seen as guaranteeing the independence of programme-making from the influence of advertisers: no rational person, it was argued, supposes that what newspapers publish in their editorial columns is determined by advertisers. Spot advertising would protect the editorial integrity of commercial television. 'Advertising will be an asset worn as a bright feather in the cap of free TV,' Sir Robert Fraser wrote, 'not as a soiled choker around the throat.'

Sponsorship of all programmes except news and current events was finally permitted in 1988. However, on the ITV channels there continued to be a fierce battle about who could sponsor what – and considerable anxiety about potential commercial abuses of the authority of some programmes. Such niceties, of course, were not part of the satellite broadcasting regime. Here there were few restrictions on sponsorship and far more advertising was allowed. Indeed, one of the oddities of the intense political campaigns of the period was the BBC's failure to point out, in its own defence, that while the British public enjoys some adverts, repeated research has shown how irritating they find too many. Historically, the British public has enjoyed and endured less advertising per hour of viewing than any American or European viewer. They may be appalled when the full commercial diet of adverts reaches them.

However, during the 1980s, powerful interests complained to a sympathetic government that the ITV companies and the IBA were using their monopoly too effectively. Between 1981 and 1989, the advertising revenue of commercial television doubled in real terms, fierce

competition for air time raised the price of advertising, and increased the discretionary power of companies. Thus there was great commercial pressure to create alternative sources of air time: cable, satellite, and a competing commercial terrestrial Channel 5 were proposed, in order to bring down advertising costs. Advertisers believed they had a strong interest in breaking the economic basis of the existing ITV companies' cultural power.

Hostile critics argued that the IBA had become too closely identified with the ITV companies. A new body, the Independent Television Commission, was set up to preside over the 'deregulated' commercial system, but with far more limited powers than its predecessor. Thus franchises for ITV (which after 1993 became known as Channel 3) were to be auctioned. Auction winners will then hold franchises for ten years. The ITC will have little authority to demand changes in programme performance. Thus while the Commission is obliged to ensure that public sensibilities about images of sex or violence are not offended, it has limited authority with which to perform the more critical task of ensuring that good programmes continue to be made and shown by companies desperately trying to recoup the huge capital expense of their franchise bid.

The IBA's powers, however imperfectly exercised, stemmed from its economic sanctions within the ITV system. Since its inception, the ITC has developed imperialist ambitions. Clearly it would like to use its controls to bring traditional public service criteria to bear on the enlarged commercial sector. Indeed, the ITC is probably responsible for a profound metaphorical change in ministers' language. In 1986 guarantees of programme quality were to be a 'factor' in allowing applicants to enter the auction for Channel 3 franchises; by 1987 they were being discussed as a 'hurdle'; they rose during 1988 to a 'fence'; and by 1990 they were confidently described as 'a barrier to the inferior'. But metaphors alone will not control commercial pressures to maximize profits, and it remains to be seen how far the ITC can realize its ambitions.

Yet many of the pressures exercised by advertisers on the content of programmes have remained remarkably consistent since the start of commercial broadcasting. The extent to which they affect programmes and schedules depends on the ways in which they are balanced and regulated.

Thus it is clear that even spot advertising does not preclude advertisers from calculating how the editorial content of programmes affects the impact of their advertising message. 'After all', as an advertiser wrote as early as the 1950s, 'an advert is seen as part of a programme' (*Campaign*, 14 March 1956). Advertisers have prior knowledge of programme schedules which are published each quarter in advance of their transmission. They thus know the general character, if not the precise content, of the programmes with which their advertisements will be shown. There have been cases in which advertisers have avoided certain programmes on the grounds that their content is unlikely to dispose viewers to respond favourably to their advertisements. This is most common when the content of the programme

clashes directly with the appeal of the advertisement (for example, airlines have withdrawn advertisements from appearing in documentaries about air disasters). However, it has also occurred when a programme is thought to have associations that detract from the broad image of the product.

In contrast, some programmes may be preferred because they provide an editorial environment conducive to a favourable response to particular advertisements, or because their prestige is thought likely to enhance that of the product or service advertised within them. Thus advertisements for newspapers appear near the news, and those for beer are often placed close to programmes on sport. The very fact that such intuitive judgements associated with programme content can influence how advertising time is bought must affect the decisions made by the companies about scheduling.

This pressure is, however, marginal. The main consideration of advertisers is not the programme environment of their advertisements, but the size and composition of the audience that the programmes will attract. Advertisers buy television time in two ways. Sometimes they buy a 'guaranteed audience', that is a fixed number of viewers. This may be made up of many small sections of the audience and spread over a whole range of programmes with low ratings. Alternatively it may be composed of a few large audiences during peak viewing times. In either case, what is bought is viewers. However, advertisers may also purchase particular advertising slots. The television companies may oblige advertisers to buy a 'package' of slots, composed of some of the peak viewing times the advertisers want, but combining other less attractive slots. Nevertheless, advertisers are more in control of the kinds of audiences their campaign will reach if they buy specific slots.

Commercial television rapidly became the leading advertising medium for mass consumer products and so was under pressure to put on programmes with an appeal to a mass audience. However, many patrons of commercial television have sought to reach particular constituents within the mass market, in particular women (who are the key decision-makers in many consumer purchases) and young people. Since commercial television derives its revenue from advertisers and not from viewers, the commercial system is thus led towards catering for these groups. Thus the success of commercial breakfast television depends almost entirely on its capacity to attract an audience rich in consuming housewives.

Market research can provide a detailed breakdown of the audience profile for particular programmes. A massive investment is made in monitoring how many and what categories of people watch each programme. This research assists the television companies to produce programmes that will deliver the required audiences, and provides them with an accurate measurement of the audiences which they have sold.

Research also helps advertisers predict from advance programme schedules what audiences they can expect to buy. This research takes the form of continuous monitoring of a representative sample of viewers, providing detailed figures for programme viewing



analysed in terms of the size and class of audience. It is supplemented by additional surveys that analyse other more specialized characteristics of viewers. This research has established that certain types of programmes – soap operas, situation comedies, the main news bulletin, and variety programmes – have a generalized appeal that transcends differences in social class, age, and sex. It also reveals that other types of programmes – most notably political documentary programmes and serious drama – are not watched as much by women and young people. The results have shown a remarkable stability of viewing preferences since the introduction of commercial television. There has been little change in the pattern of mass viewing, apart from a small shift away from variety and sport.

The way in which commercial television time is sold generates pressure for quantity of audience, rather than quality of audience appreciation. It has even been suggested that some advertisers prefer television programmes not to be too involving, for fear of detracting from the impact of their advertisements. This has been called the ‘Let’s-give-the-public-the-shows-they-least-like-so-they’ll-watch-the-ads’ theory.<sup>8</sup> The widespread use of video-recording machines has made research into the effects of advertising even more complex. Little is yet known about the extent to which the public uses this technology to avoid adverts. But it is assumed that ‘spooling on’ is a common habit.

The IBA attempted to offset the pressure for quantity of audience by circulating the companies with a weekly Audience Appreciation Index, which monitors the quality of audience response to individual programmes. This index has consistently shown that information programmes are more highly appreciated than those concerned with entertainment. There seems to be an inverse relationship between audience size and audience enjoyment.

However, it is doubtful whether this intervention had much influence on the time-buying decisions of advertisers, as no connection has yet been established between the audience’s enjoyment or involvement in programmes, and their responsiveness to advertisements shown at the same time. The implications of audience appreciation research have only lately begun to be developed. It has been argued that within the two categories of information and entertainment programmes, those with large audiences tend to have higher appreciation scores than those with small audiences. Indeed some market researchers have come up with the less than remarkable finding that the more demanding a programme is, the better it has to be before people will watch it.<sup>9</sup>

The pressure on commercial television to maximize audiences naturally leads to a preference for ‘entertainment’ as opposed to ‘serious’ programmes. Within the broad category of entertainment there is a preference for programmes which have previously demonstrated their appeal to women and young people. Hence there is a bias against showing sport at some times of the day, as it mainly appeals to men. Commercial pressures have also led programme-makers to emphasize the personal and human interest aspects of

documentary stories. Thus structural social problems are treated in the form of individual case studies. This kind of programme reaches a wider audience, particularly amongst women, than other documentary styles. The prominence given to certain types of programmes on commercial television is a direct consequence of the pressures generated by advertising for the production of certain types of audiences.

Advertising also generates a strong pressure for the television companies to produce predictable and regular audiences, as well as to maximize them. While the ratings for any particular programme may be hard to predict, because they depend so much on factors outside the control of any commercial company (in particular what the BBC is showing), viewing patterns over a year, as well as the categories and sequences of programmes, have been easy to predict.

Advertisers rely on programme schedules to produce the audiences which they pay for. This has encouraged attempts to use the sequence of programmes in order to manipulate the size of an audience over an evening. Consequently programmes with a broad audience appeal are shown early in the evening, in an attempt to capture viewing families for a particular channel for the rest of the night's programmes. Scheduling attempts to expand and consolidate the mass audience throughout the evening. It is this pressure which leads to the screening of 'minority' information programmes outside peak viewing times, and to the 'twinning' of BBC and ITV schedules for current affairs programmes. By doing this the companies may minimize choice, but they also minimize the loss of audience from programmes that get low ratings. In addition, current events programmes are thus seen by a far larger general audience than would otherwise be the case.

The proliferation of broadcasting channels which was so enthusiastically advocated by advertisers will, however, make many of these calculations increasingly insecure. Already the use of videos makes the assessment of impact of adverts more difficult. Accelerating fragmentation of the great national audiences previously enjoyed by the duopoly may provide, as some have argued, many new specialized concentrations of consumers, or it may provide nothing more than smaller, more unpredictable audiences. Indeed, the most enthusiastic advocates of 'deregulation', the advertisers, have begun to be anxious about the future effectiveness of advertising on TV at all.

Whatever happens, there is evidence that these commercial attempts to manipulate the audience are only partly successful. Goodhardt has argued that most families watch television sporadically. The 'inheritance factor' (or the likelihood of watching the programme that comes next) seems effective for only one programme, not the whole evening's viewing. Nor would it seem that people become loyal to a channel because they are addicts of particular series. Out of forty serials screened in the spring of one year only 54 per cent of people who saw one episode of any serial also saw the next. Most of the people watching the second half of the story were different from those who had seen its beginning.<sup>10</sup>

Nevertheless, the commercial companies necessarily continue to try and maximize their audiences. The pursuit of the largest possible audience is not in itself harmful. But if it is narrowly interpreted, it may lead to schedules that are cautious, conservative, and very rarely break established patterns.

The needs of all advertisers using commercial television are not the same. Some have sought more specialized groups within the mass audience, and the financial significance of this kind of advertising is growing. This is indicated by the growth of corporate advertising, in which giant companies are merely concerned to project an image of their activities rather than any specific product. In addition, there has been an increase in consumer durables and motor advertising. These categories have risen as a proportion of total television advertising expenditure from 7 per cent in 1968 to 30 per cent in 1988.<sup>11</sup> This has been accompanied by a fall in food, drink, and household advertising directed at the mass market. Furthermore, there has been a growing tendency even amongst mass-market-oriented advertisers towards directing their campaigns at particular segments of the market.

The impact of this shift, however, has been muted by the difficulties involved in translating the aims of marketing strategies into buying television time. There have been fashions in market research which determine how the audience is offered to the advertiser. In the 1950s and 1960s motivational research was dominant. 'Beecham's buyers are a little more likely to strive, and are a little more neurotic,' stressed an Associated Rediffusion survey in 1962. 'Compared, that is with Aspro, Anadin and Disprin buyers, however, they are noticeably more extrovert.' Increasingly, though, there was a trend towards pilot studies of particular products and towards attempts to segment target markets with a fine precision.

However, despite attempts (by Leo Burnett and the British Bureau of Market Research in particular) to develop 'psychographic' profiles of television viewers, such methods remain impressionistic. No satisfactory method has been developed that enables advertising men or women to select time slots in a way that allows them to reach the types of personalities believed to be particularly susceptible to their advertising campaigns. Consequently commercial television companies have not been obliged to cater for particular groups (at least those defined by psychological categories) to any great extent.

Advertisers have been most interested in reaching 'light viewers', who are like the 'floating' voters in election studies. The success of a campaign may depend on the proportion of light viewers, who might not otherwise know about the product, that it can reach. For a time, light viewers were regarded as being particularly selective in their television watching habits. This was partly because a large proportion of light viewers were middle class, and were believed to be discriminating.

However, this view has now been challenged. Goodhardt has suggested that light viewers tend not to watch particular types of programmes, nor do they prefer low-rating minority programmes. They tend to be as unselective as heavy viewers, but merely watch less

television. Hence support of minority programmes does not seem to be a means of reaching the light viewer. On the contrary, it appears that advertising on high-rating programmes represents the most efficient way of reaching light viewers. Another study suggests, furthermore, that the pursuit of light viewers is in itself misguided. What matters is not how many advertisements of a particular product are seen, but how many in relation to the number of advertisements of a competing product.<sup>12</sup> The light viewer sees less than the heavy viewer of *all* the competing products on television. It may, therefore, be better to reach him or her through other advertising media.

A further problem for the advertiser is that neither minority programmes nor particular *genres* of programmes can be relied on to deliver specialized audiences. Goodhardt's analysis of the housewife audience for twenty different categories of programme showed that only Westerns are positively sought out by any viewers. Westerns were the only kind of programme with a slightly higher level of 'duplication viewing' – that is the likelihood of a viewer seeing more than one programme within this category – than could be explained by channel loyalty or overall rating figures. Most people, Goodhardt's work suggests, see further programmes of any particular *genre* only because they prefer one channel, or because the programme has a high rating, not because they are specifically interested in its content. 'People who watched one arts programme', according to Goodhardt, 'had no more tendency to see another arts programme than to see, say, a Western or a religious programme, or a sports programme with a comparable weighting.'

This characterization of television audiences as indiscriminate and promiscuous in their viewing habits has been challenged. Sue Stoessel argued that the results of Goodhardt's research were misleading because they aggregated behaviour over several weeks. This obscured major changes in viewing behaviour from week to week. It is only by examining these detailed changes in viewing behaviour, she suggested, that preferences for individual programmes could be revealed. An analysis of changes in viewing figures over successive weeks reveals the effects of positive choice and preference, as does an analysis that distinguishes between audience behaviour in the different regions. In London, she argued, light viewers are more heavily concentrated amongst the audiences of some specific programme types. There are significant groups of viewers, at least in the London area, who do choose to watch programmes because of their content.<sup>13</sup>

This debate is likely to continue. The apparent failure of different categories of programmes to divide audiences into conveniently specialized groups has important implications. It may reduce the potential for commercial television to create new patterns of programmes. A low-rating current affairs programme has little to offer advertisers if it delivers, not a discriminating élite (like a 'quality' national newspaper), but large numbers of heavy viewers so hypnotized that they cannot even summon the energy to switch off the ballet or Third World poverty programme offered at the margins of peak viewing times.

Indeed the audiences for specialized programmes do not necessarily share other characteristics which would make them marketable packages for sale to advertisers. A shared interest in Westerns does not imply, for instance, a propensity to trade in a new car each year or a tendency to be a young couple setting up home for the first time. On the other hand, if Stoessel is correct, there is a market for élite and quality advertising in television, but it may not be most efficiently reached through this medium.

Indeed in so far as advertising has promoted minority programming hitherto, it has tended to be in a form that produces groups of viewers which are marketable. Travel programmes, and those about cars and cooking, have all developed partly because they cater for audiences with a shared interest in buying certain sorts of products. The advertising for cable and satellite television depends on the development of this commodity-based ‘narrow-casting’. The greater choice of channels will, it is suggested, offer advertisers more refined groups of audience interest. However, those with less material interests in common have been, and will continue to be, less favoured.<sup>14</sup>

### **Public regulation and the public interest**

In its time the IBA played an important role in mitigating the adverse effects of advertising on broadcasting. Nevertheless, at times the Authority was passive. For example it was reluctant to ensure that companies adhered to the programme policies on which they won franchises. It was difficult for the Authority to be more active in its surveillance, partly because its statutory obligations were imprecise in many areas. However, political realities limited its power more fundamentally. The commercial television lobby is highly organized and politically effective. It employs public relations officers and cultivates an able group of MPs. In addition, many newspapers are sympathetic to the commercial television lobby. Its interests are also protected by an extensive network of contacts based on the interlocking directorships linking commercial television companies to other banking and industrial organizations. In contrast, the IBA was less effectively organized as a political lobby, and its powers of supervision – which were inevitably the product of political negotiation – were consequently constrained. Finally, the IBA would be ‘punished’ for its interventions into schedules or programme decisions. Thus, having been required to present more balanced programming over Christmas, the companies could retaliate by showing programmes which got only very low ratings.

However, the aims of the IBA were furthered by the presence of the BBC as a ‘public service’ institution, committed to broad social and political objectives rather than to the maximization of profit. There was in Britain a great convergence between public and commercial broadcasting in which the two systems influenced each other.

In addition, for much of its history commercial television was in a strong bargaining position in relation to advertisers. ITV was able in the past to resist some advertising pressure precisely because it was in a seller's market. Companies sold advertising time in ways which reduced the pressures to maximize audiences. The high profits and monopolistic position of commercial television created an environment in which the IBA could be more effective.

### **Swinging sixties and sober seventies**

In the 1960s and 1970s television came of age. Since 1970 there has been a remarkable revolution not in the technology but in the content of broadcasting. In this period, television rapidly developed its own forms – in the treatment of politics, interviews, documentaries, and plays – which were quite different from the earlier styles of radio or film. During the 1960s television humour began to take the form of satirizing itself – an indication of how widely the conventions of the new medium had been publicly absorbed.

This was partly a product of a more generally liberal mood, which made a wider range of possibilities available for broadcasters. After Pilkington, the BBC became a more adventurous organization. At the same time, the independent television companies became more secure, because more profitable. By the 1960s, moreover, television had taken over from the cinema a mass working-class audience.

In many ways the vast size of the television audience has posed problems for the medium. There is a continual pressure to screen programmes that will attract the largest audiences and cause offence to the smallest numbers of viewers. Yet the attempt to reach a big audience while meeting 'public service' criteria has been a creative tension.

Some commentators, like Stuart Hood, Michael Tracey, Anthony Smith, and even Sir Hugh Greene, have seen the period since the early 1970s as one of increasing caution in television. Not only has the reporting of the troubles in Northern Ireland provided many problems for the broadcasting institutions, but also the BBC and ITV have become more vulnerable to government threats over a broad range of issues.

### **Channel 4, minorities, and money**

Yet it was a reinterpretation of the public service principle which produced Channel 4. The ideas behind the creation of this new channel were a product of the tensions identified during television's most creative and expansionist years. But it was also influenced by the political problems of the period. However, by the time the station opened there had been a change not only in the general economic climate but also more damagingly, in the conditions of competition for television audiences.

Channel 4 'publishes' programmes made by independent production companies. It does not make any programmes of its own, although it does commission them. Originally it was financed by the existing commercial companies who supplied much of its material. As it did not sell its own advertising time it was somewhat removed from the direct pressures experienced by the rest of the commercial sector. The 1990 Broadcasting Act changed this: the channel is now to be made more vulnerable to advertisers' interests. However, it is still obliged to screen programmes for the various 'minority' interests that are not well served elsewhere in the television system.

The minority-based rationale of Channel 4 had a number of origins. Perhaps the most important was the experience of even the most distinguished and 'marketable' producers and directors that it was impossible to work, in Britain, outside the BBC or ITV companies.<sup>15</sup> Those who wanted to make programmes that did not conveniently fit into the patterns of viewing developed by the duopoly, or those who simply wanted a greater control over their own material, found it difficult to raise the necessary finance or find buyers for what they made. It was argued that there evidently were audiences within the mass of viewers with more distinctive tastes and needs, but the existing channels allowed these consumers little opportunity to demonstrate their preferences. A new pattern of differently organized production companies, liberated from the limitations of the ITV or BBC systems, would be able to find and develop these more specialized audiences. Therefore any innovation in the television service ought to make it possible for 'independent' producers to explore the interests of these minorities.

It was also strongly argued that television had failed to reflect Britain's contemporary cultural diversity. Reformers emphasized the needs of the various Black and Asian communities, as well as those of minorities like the young and the old, for programmes which dealt with their concerns and ways of life. Any new service, it was suggested, should produce material for these social and ethnic minorities.

Finally, some market researchers believed that the blunt instrument of television advertising could, by the 1980s, be refined. A new channel could offer programme incentives that attracted discriminating 'minorities' of selective television viewers and could sell them the things they had particular interests in. For the first time television would be able to deliver higher concentrations of the more affluent consumers that advertisers wanted.

The logic of Channel 4 looked appealingly neat. It would offer greater freedom of choice, and serve minorities neglected elsewhere. Unfortunately the minorities that producers, social reformers, and advertisers were interested in were somewhat different.

Channel 4 represents an important (and perhaps the last) reinterpretation of the public service role of broadcasting. In this version, the freedom of creative individuals to risk making the programmes they want to make is seen as the guarantor of public good. It was a

Labour government which decided to back the new channel (although a Conservative one presided over its birth). Labour support was based on a feeling that the political consensus developed by the existing broadcasting services was too restrictive. Consequently the channel was given the opportunity to create new conventions for dealing with controversial and political issues. It is not obliged to balance views within a programme, but only over the whole schedule and over time. It can, therefore, broadcast more clearly partisan material.

However, the channel's capacity to innovate depends on the politics of money. The only ultimate defence Channel 4 has for its new style and new programmes is their ability to attract advertising revenue. By the 1980s the Conservative government was using the success of Channel 4 to attack public service broadcasting, by demanding that greater numbers of programmes should be produced by 'independent' companies. Yet Channel 4's innovations had been completely dependent on the development of public service ideals.

In the late 1980s both the BBC and ITV companies were obliged to take an increasing proportion of their programmes from the 'independent' sector; by 1993 this is expected to account for 25 per cent of their output. This has led to the emergence of some culturally important and commercially successful companies – and of innovative programmes. 'The Media Show', the astutely topical series on Stalin, and many others were made by production companies outside the duopoly. However, whether such companies are actually independent, except in the formal sense, is dubious. A recent survey by the London Business School showed that they were all financially precarious with low profit margins.<sup>16</sup> People set up independent television companies because they want to make programmes – not because they want to make money. The study also showed how completely dependent these companies were on the patronage of the established channels. The new satellite companies were, as yet, hardly interested in their quality products.

The limitations of commercial broadcasting are largely the result of the economic pressures to which it is exposed. That British commercial television has been in some ways superior to others is due to the public service traditions and institutions that have so far determined its development. Nevertheless, the implications of a comment by Sidney Bernstein, the television industrialist, should always be borne in mind. 'Commercial television is a very unusual business,' he said, '... you don't necessarily make more money if you provide a better product.'

Yet the market and the audience for television programmes is altering dramatically under the impact of a whole series of technological changes. Whether the advantage of increased variety will be enough to offset the dilution of resources remains to be seen. Indeed this period may yet be regarded, in television terms, as a lost golden age.



## Notes

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- 13 S. Stoessel, reply to Roberts and Price, 'The real weight of light viewers', *Admap* (June 1979), p. 277.
- 14 M. Johnson, 'Narrow-casting – problems and opportunities', *Admap* (June 1983).
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*Video, cable, and satellite*

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Video, cable, and satellite technologies, and their attendant communication novelties – ways of transmitting entertainment, words, pictures, data, voices, and other services in huge variety, over vast distances, at ferocious speeds – have been discussed in such extravagant terms, and introduced with such little debate, that their wider social and economic implications have been ignored. We are in danger of seeing emerging patterns as necessary, or even more dangerously as technologically determined, and accepting the consequences fatalistically.

Sixty-year-old audience habits are changing. But the impact will go far beyond what people do with their leisure. There is also the likelihood of direct impact on political behaviour and institutions. Every previous innovation in communications, from the emergence of the mass circulation press through the development of radio and television, has profoundly altered not only how politics is understood in societies, but the nature of political negotiation itself. Such an immense set of changes as are now occurring will inevitably revolutionize political expectations, behaviour, and institutions. We, as yet, can only speculate about the likely effects: but they will clearly influence the future of democracy.

Experts have been divided between the neophiliacs and the cultural pessimists. Neophiliacs write of the disappearance of class (by which they mean that traditional types of work will be replaced), the disappearance of workplaces (as the work-bench is supplanted by the home computer terminal), and the eventual relocation of the production process to the developing world as the management of information (about production and consumption) becomes the key commodity in the technologically advanced economies.

Such predictions seem premature. Neophilic arguments bring to mind an earlier debate about the arrival of the ‘post-industrial’ society. Comments by Anthony Smith and John Howkins belong to the same tradition as Daniel Bell and Alain Touraine,<sup>1</sup> who argued that the expansion of the service sector, increasing expenditure on the production of knowledge,

and ever larger investment in research, together with changes in the technologies of production and leisure, were creating a new social order. *Plus ça change*: as Krishan Kumar has argued, similar developments become apparent early in the history of industrialization, and do not represent any qualitative change.<sup>2</sup> Many of the neophilic predictions of future patterns are based on naïve extrapolation from current trends, and ignore the idiosyncrasies of historical development.

The pessimists, on the other hand, see changes in mass commercial culture as a subversion of 'standards'. In the discussion of broadcasting technologies, the new 'cultural' pessimists, such as Nick Garnham and Richard Collins, joined hands with the 'industrial' pessimists like Henry Braverman,<sup>3</sup> who shared concern over the impact of computer and information technology on employment. Thus broadcasting becomes the fulcrum of a wider social and economic upheaval. The pessimists see little evidence for the emergence of new cultural patterns and much evidence for the irreparable damage to old ones.

In practice this 'revolution' represents the continued industrialization of the service sector. New technology performs old tasks more efficiently: in particular the sorting, correlating, and ordering of information in bureaucracies. Many of the current problems in broadcasting policy concern the next stage: the domestication of the computer.

Indeed from both sides of the British political spectrum great, and perhaps unrealistic, hopes of industrial revival have been pinned on the exploitation of new communications technologies, particularly of cabling. On the one hand those on the left have argued that the provision of a national cable network is similar to the laying down of the other great service infrastructures of industrial society: water, rail, and road. It has been persuasively suggested that markets for goods and products increasingly exist not in physical space, but between those who are in contact via the networks of cable communication. Goods and services can be produced anywhere and to any specification with the complex exchange of data provided by cable facilities. It has thus been argued that the state should invest in a massive programme of cable provision in order to provoke a dramatic new regional and national economic revival. Advocates of this strategy point to the success of French governments' attempts to modernize communications. Using the notion of 'informatics', the French argued that access to, and understanding of, the most modern means of communication is part of being a contemporary citizen. Consequently, French policy makers have suggested that the state must educate the people and provide the means for the fullest possible public participation in this technology. The French government has also based its policy on the belief that the industrial possibilities of cable systems can only be developed if the technology is in the widest possible use. Thus in France there has been a typically 'dirigiste' development of cable and telephone services by the state, according to a clearly laid-down plan, with little room for liberal 'free market' principles.

However, those on the right have also been concerned to develop cable and computer services. Indeed, much recent broadcasting policy, as we shall see, has been directed at encouraging private, individual investment in cable and when this failed, it hoped to substitute satellite service. There has been no commitment in Britain to an extension of citizenship rights or knowledge. Indeed, the direction of broadcasting policy which it might be argued should always be considered along with education, has been to exaggerate the divisions between groups of people. British broadcasting policy was previously based on the concept that it had to make the same rights available to all audiences, citizens, voters. This is no longer the case. Increasingly policy is based on one right only: the 'right' to pay for extra services. Thus Conservative policy makers, while also emphasizing the importance of cable communication, have been prepared to reduce the access to information and services of most citizens in the belief that development could most efficiently be led by those who can pay for it.

There is also a key economic problem (a reflection of distinct patterns within the British economy) which influences policy decision within this area. The Conservative government during the 1980s, although it wished to encourage the private acquisition of cable television (so that the public would at least become a potential market for the other goods and services cable might offer), was also concerned, rather belatedly, with the provision of advanced communications to the financial and banking sector. So dominating now is this interest in the British economy, that fulfilling its urgent needs for greatly expanded new information services became an overriding but unstated priority within government policy. Many of the decisions in this area were thus, covertly, determined by the perceived interests – or by the pressure exerted – by this sector of the economy.

The effects of the development of increasingly interdependent technologies of telephone, data, and broadcasting services have all, in England, been used to diminish the democratic access to these services. Thus, traditionally, heavy (business) telephone users subsidized lighter (domestic) subscribers' long-distance calls, which tended to be shorter and less frequent. As the costs of communication became an ever-more important item in commercial budgets, the pressure to reduce costs and to influence policy increased. Broadcasting policy too, has been determined more by concerns to protect, for instance, the domestic electronics industry, than by an interest in the political and cultural obligations of broadcasting.

The problems posed by this kind of development are common to all countries. Few countries, however, have such strong broadcasting traditions as Britain, or have had such determined neophiliacs at the helm. When the Conservative government came to power in 1979 an official ideology of non-interference in the market was buttressed by a vigorously neophilic view of information technology. A key Cabinet Information Technology Advisory Panel (ITAP), including experts in electronics and industrialists but nobody with

any broadcasting experience, concluded that industrial revival was to be stimulated by 'cabling up' the nation. The necessary conditions for this economic miracle (a large proportion of homes linked to high-quality cable networks), it was argued, would best be created by providing an alluring range of television channels for the eager public. That these would inevitably offer a consistent diet of old films, sport, American soap opera, and light entertainment was regarded as incidental.

In 1982 the committee urged the adoption, not of North American models, but of the most sophisticated cabling system that would permit households to receive and use several hundred different channels. Thus the nation would be lured into the new infrastructure by stealth: having paid for cabling in order to receive more entertainment, television users would find themselves linked conveniently to a variety of multipurpose networks with opportunities for computerized shopping, working, and learning. 'It is as if', one commentator suggested, 'the Roman Senate had sanctioned, without debate, the proposition that improvements to the supply system of the Roman legions should first be introduced by speeding up the chariots in the hippodrome.'<sup>4</sup>

So solid was the expectation of a virtually insatiable appetite for television, that official calculations have been based on the assumption that the technological leap forward could be accomplished without support from public funds. Britain was the only country in Europe which expected the entire capital cost of laying a cable system to be paid for by the sellers and consumers of the recycled programmes and films. In West Germany, France, and Japan, state investment in a comprehensive cable system has become a major, and expanding, element in the annual budgets.

Apart from the problem of initial finance, there are other grounds for wondering whether neophilic hopes are not premature. Thus in the USA – where the success of cable had been seen as providing a model for Britain – the cable revolution seems to be failing, or at least stabilizing. In the last half of the 1980s more cable stations closed in the USA than opened.

Indeed, popular programmes aimed at mass audiences, supposedly the basis of cable expansion, have failed to find adequate markets. So far where cable has succeeded commercially there has been a price. In 1995 the most profitable American cable network offered its viewers a 'choice' of twenty movies repeated on a monthly basis.<sup>5</sup> The pressure of real or supposed mass taste has been inexorable: even in Manhattan, with its sophisticated viewers, CBS was forced to end the brief experiment of providing one quality station.

Indeed, in Britain there is an additional factor, more powerful than in the USA: video. The proportion of video-owning homes is already twice as great in Britain as in the USA and, despite the recession, video ownership continues to grow faster in Britain than in any other European country. By 1995 most families possessed a video: a development not taken into account by official calculations earlier. Satellite television services, launched with immense publicity, have still to attract large audiences or make big profits. Unconstrained

by the public service obligations, the first, Sky Television, owned by Rupert Murdoch, provided four channels pitched relentlessly at the supposedly popular tabloid market: a children's channel which offered nothing but cartoons, a film channel (for which, in addition to a dish, you have to buy a decoder), and two other channels showing replicas of exhausted formula programmes, mostly presented by familiar formula faces. This service so far has hardly added to the 'choice' the sovereign consumer could indulge in. Indeed, by buying up sports events it clearly diminishes public choice. So far, cable and satellite services have yet to be really successful here. In addition to these satellite services Channel 5 was launched with radically simplified programme formats in 1997. These changes mean that the behaviour of the television audience as well as television production values and finance are bound to alter. Nevertheless, there is evidence that in the battle for public viewing hours, these new 'viewing' opportunities face a more formidable task than had been expected. Certainly in Britain there had been no cable 'revolution' by the start of the 1990s,<sup>6</sup> nor was a post-industrial society much in evidence.

### **The end of public service broadcasting?**

One reason for believing that cable and satellite – with or without government intervention – may not reveal an as yet untapped demand for a wider range of television programmes is that recently, and following an American trend, the number of 'live' television viewing hours per British inhabitant has actually declined. Between 1990 and 1995, there was a continued small decline of nearly an hour. During the 1990s Christmas viewing, figures never recovered their previous levels.

As we have seen, part of the reason is the parallel growth of video: time previously spent on current programmes is now devoted to video cassettes. (Significantly, 75 per cent of video usage is for BBC and ITV programmes at non-networked times, a statistic that throws doubt on the thesis that there exists a pent-up demand for material not presently available on existing channels.) Since, however, the downward trend preceded the take-off of video, other factors – boredom with the medium, for example – were presumably also involved. If so, pressure on the networks may not cease when video ownership reaches saturation point.

Certainly satellite, cable, and video in combination will accelerate the decline in audiences for existing networks: more viewing opportunities will mean fewer viewing hours. One change is a move away from 'family viewing'. Early evidence from satellite television showed that rather than arguing about what to watch together, family members were separating to watch different programmes. Thus apparently while fathers watch sport (in the sitting room), mothers are now relegated to viewing soap operas in the kitchen, while teenagers consume pop video channels in their bedrooms.<sup>7</sup> The take-up of satellite and

video demonstrates that the public is willing to spend a higher proportion of its disposable income on entertainment, but this fragmentation of the audience has barely been explored by advertisers and its wider social implications have, as yet, hardly been considered. As ratings fall, something will have to be sacrificed in the bitter struggle for survival. An early victim may be public service broadcasting, not of course just the BBC, but the whole range of quality programmes and perhaps even the possibility of innovative broadcasting. The public service ideal depends for its realization on funding. In the new hyper-competitive climate, funds will be in short supply. Indeed, by the 1990s, even advertisers, who had been so clamorous in their demands for more advertising time, were becoming anxious about the likely *over-supply* of time. As the White Paper on the Development of Cable Systems and Services pointed out, one hour of home-grown documentary could cost £20,000. By contrast, an hour of American soap opera could be bought for as little as £2,000. One possibility therefore is a trend similar to that in the cinema of the 1940s and 1950s: fewer programmes made in Britain, and an ever-expanding proportion of imports.

Here Thatcherite market liberalism had particularly disastrous effects. With the abolition of quotas for foreign programmes, there was little to restrain cable and satellite stations from importing much and commissioning little. With no rules to enforce a balanced diet of programming, the new stations naturally turned, like their American counterparts, to the lowest common denominator of pop, chat, soap, and sport. Perhaps the wider range of viewing which satellite, cable, and video provide will lead to an imaginative exercise by viewers of 'freedom of choice'. Existing evidence, however, suggests the opposite: audiences will not have the freedom to consume anything other than an even greater concentration of pop, chat, soap, and sport than now.

If this analysis is correct, a shift of power within the networks is likely to follow. Where broadcasting is protected through subsidy, monopoly, or legislative requirements, producers can be given their head; where commercial pressures necessitate a heavy reliance on imported package deals and low-budget formula programming, producers will be reduced, in effect, to corporation men: executives carrying out company policy. With less money available, making fewer 'original' programmes, initiative will be at a low premium. In particular, there may be less incentive to make programmes about British subjects, political, social, or cultural, purely for domestic consumption. Indeed, it is ironic that much of the privately commissioned research for the satellite stations has shown just how wise the consumer is, and how badly served by neo-liberal belief in market forces. The public has found the existing satellite services repetitive, limited, and based on all too familiar styles and formats. They also recognize that the BBC, ITV, and Channel 4 offer a greater variety of programmes, and of course they still continue to watch far more of these than the satellite stations, albeit increasingly to their own schedules on video.

Some people do, of course, have specialist interests which satellite channels may serve. Nevertheless, so far the public remains more discriminating as a body of viewers than as newspaper readers. Yet, it seems oblivious to the likely disappearance of the services it values most. Under the current regime, market forces, not consumer interests, will come to determine programme making.

There is a further danger or at least an area of uncertainty. Until recently the economics of television was determined by an invariable: people bought television sets to watch programmes put out by the networks. The relationship between programme-maker and viewer, through the medium of a single-purpose instrument, and the role of public policy in regulating programme content, were based on this simple truth. The old relationship is rapidly weakening and soon will hold no more. Watching 'live' programmes ('live' in the sense of received from the ether) is already only one of the purposes of a television set. When it becomes increasingly common to use television not only for video, but also to make hotel reservations, monitor electricity consumption, and place bets, 'live' viewing may become a comparatively minor factor in the calculations of those who buy, sell, and produce television sets, with inevitable consequences for those who make programmes as well. At the same time, the obligations of public policy become more difficult to define when the 'content' of television is no longer so evidently a single 'cultural' product.

### **Politics and new technology**

There will also be consequences for politicians and political parties. Broadcasting, and especially television, has been a vehicle of political integration, establishing what Denis McQuail has called the 'common coin of values, ideas, information and cultural expression'. Arguably television has set the political agenda: ordering public priorities and arousing public concern for good or ill.

Key to this process has been the national audience. The power of television has been based to a considerable degree on lack of choice: almost any nationally networked programme is certain to count its viewers in millions. Cable, video, and satellite have increased the range of 'choice' without necessarily increasing variety or quality of subject matter (perhaps, as has been argued, reducing it). A larger number of highly competitive commercial stations will fragment: the national audience will vanish. Here we should avoid premature judgement. Such a change might have beneficial results or bad ones. Given the centrality of broadcasting to modern politics, however, it is virtually certain to alter the nature of the political game. Already some effects of increased 'choice' on political culture can be seen. The recent proliferation of quality newspapers has nevertheless lessened the impact of each. In the long run, this diminished authority will



undoubtedly influence both the role and the standard of these newspapers. A similar process is taking place with television: the fragmentation of the national audience means that the significance of any one programme or channel may be greatly reduced in the future. It is important not to be confused here. It is not being suggested that the media will have less effect: just that their effects will be different.

These effects, however, remain speculative. Will national coverage be reduced in importance relative to local issues? Such a development might be positive. It might provide citizens with greater awareness of what affects them directly, and give more scope to local campaigns and pressure groups. On the other hand, the example of the existing local press gives little ground for optimism. Lack of initiative, cost, and the fear of writs have discouraged the vast majority of newspapers, including the big-circulation regional dailies, from acting as anything more than publishing houses for politicians' hand-outs.

If, therefore, a diversity of local television stations produces an increase in local political reporting, the benefits remain uncertain. What does seem likely is that the present 'privileged' status of news and documentary, which has been a prominent feature of public service television, will be eroded even further. Political coverage at least held its own as inter-channel competition increased: between 1956 and 1976 the time devoted to politics quadrupled on average. Channel 4 increased the variety and range of political programmes. But this trend began to be reversed in the late 1980s. During the 1992 general election, campaign coverage on the two major channels (BBC1 and ITV) was restricted to little more than a series of interviews with leading personalities: examination of campaign issues was relegated to BBC2 and Channel 4. Cable stations with small budgets and instant commercial targets are scarcely likely to widen the range or deepen the level of discussion. Indeed, for all its failings, television coverage of politics in Britain has been serious and sustained. As Scannell has argued, broadcast politics has widened access to political processes. Indeed, it may be argued that political programmes with the depth of reporting of the quality press (though with its definition of the limits of political discussion) are served out, for largely historical reasons to do with the public service origins of the BBC, to a Sun- and Star-buying public. It seems likely that the commercial pressures of cable and video may ensure that, instead of deriving political information from television, large numbers of people will, in effect, be deprived of any reliable political information at all.

Even if there is no reduction in the time allotted to current affairs and documentary programmes, cuts in budgeting are bound to have a deleterious effect on quality and, in particular, originality. National and international reporting all too easily becomes a collaborative exposure of the viewpoint of the spokesman for a particular interest, provided that the interest in question has Establishment approval. The reason is cost as much as bias: investigative journalism, digging beneath the surface and asking

uncomfortable questions, involves more time, resources, and financial risk. Here competitive pressures are likely to be the enemy of imagination, professionalism, and above all, that which is controversial and radical.

## Censorship

Some political effects of the new technology are speculative. Others are already frighteningly apparent. One development in the second category is the closing of doors which many had regarded as permanently unlocked: the reimposition of censorship in a new form, made the more dangerous because it is occurring in response to a public mood that owes much to fear of the new technology itself.

While dismantling 'public service' standards in broadcasting, and claiming to liberalize and free the system, the Thatcher government in fact presided over the introduction of an accumulation of supervisory quangos to control videos, satellite, cable, and terrestrial broadcasting. All are concerned primarily with the exclusion of 'offensive' imagery. The movement started with the video recording bill. This introduced a system of bureaucratic precensorship of a kind unprecedented since Oliver Cromwell's 'licences of the press'. Ostensibly it was concerned with pornographic and violent home videos dubbed by the press as 'video nasties'. In practice the implications have been wider. The legislation set aside the earlier 'interpretative' view of screen images, held by the British Board of Film Censors (BBFC). This view was concerned with evaluating the meaning and intention of scenes, and emphasized that it was in context that any given act had to be judged. This view was replaced, in effect, with an index of prohibited acts. All videos have to be submitted to the board, and may be liable for censorship if they contain any material which deals with 'human sexual activity', 'images of human sexual organs' (potentially even if the films are made as part of training programmes for medical staff), or 'mutilation, torture, or other acts of gross violence' (like scenes of war and sporting events). Defence on the grounds of artistic or literary merit has been increasingly set aside.

Film censorship has a long and in some respects a hilarious history. The BBFC, however, had come to see its role as one of 'leading public taste as much as curbing it'. More recently, its board of nominees, for the first time directly appointed by the Home Office, have tended to apply specific standards of permissible and non-permissible sexual or violent acts. This style of regulation has come increasingly to determine considerations in all the other regulatory bodies. Thus there has been a decisive shift in public policy towards the media: away from the encouragement of the good towards the deletion of what government-appointed committees regard with distaste.<sup>8</sup>

Perhaps the availability of unpleasant material to the public, especially young people, will be reduced by all these supervisory bodies. However, the history of censorship in general reveals little evidence of a beneficial effect on public morality or mental health. But whatever the possible benefits, the dangers of illiberalism are manifest: thus, for example, coverage of wars, deliberately and rightly intended to shock, may well be restricted.

## Conclusion

Should we, therefore, side firmly with the cultural pessimists against the neophiliacs? The answer is that much depends on the behaviour of broad-casters and programme-makers and, more particularly, governments, in the face of technological advance. Both neophiliacs and cultural pessimists emphasize the *power* of new technologies. Machines and inventions are not inherently powerful, nor is the use to which they are put inevitable. While the new technology brings with it many dangers, as well as many opportunities, its impact will depend crucially on how it is managed. We should be able to make the choice, but in order for the choice to be a real one there will have to be changes in policy – and soon.

## Notes

- 1 See, for example, A. Smith 'The fading of an industrial age', in J. Curran, H. Smith, and P. Wingate (eds) *Impacts and Influences*, (London, Routledge, 1987).
- 2 K. Kumar, *Prophecy and Progress* (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1978).
- 3 See, for example, R. Collins, N. Garnham and G. Locksley, *The Economics of Television* (London, Croom Helm, 1987).
- 4 *Parliamentary Information Review*, No. 2, Cable and Services (June 1988).
- 5 New York Cable Stations, 'Cable Digest: the Future of Film Channels', No. 3, (November 1995).
- 6 In societies where the state was prepared to take a more 'dirigiste' role, like France and West Germany, the revolution was more advanced. See, for instance, G. Nowell Smith, *The European Experience* (London, British Film Institute, 1989); or Nick Costello, 'Telecommunication and cable in France, America and the UK', *European Commission Special Paper*, No. 3 (Jan. 1990).
- 7 MORI/NOP survey, *Satellite Television and Family Viewing* (Jan. 1990).
- 8 For an expansion of this see J. Seaton, 'Down with Aunt Tabitha: a modest media proposal', in B. Pimlott, A. Wright and T. Flower (eds), *The Alternative: Politics for a Change* (London, W. H. Allen, 1990).

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*To be or not to be the BBC:  
broadcasting in the 1980s and 1990s*

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For most of the BBC's existence, the principle of 'public service' embodied in the 1926 Charter had not been the special preserve of the Corporation. Indeed, the idea that some organizations should operate for the public good and at the public expense was shared by all political parties, as well as the leaders of private industry and commerce, and ordinary voters. In the 1980s, however, the idea was strongly challenged for the first time. For broadcasters who had taken 'public service' for granted, life suddenly became uncomfortable.

One problem was the issue of political independence. Institutions like the BBC, whose *raison d'être* included the principle of impartiality, are never at ease with very ideological governments. Their distress becomes acute when there is only one party in office for a protracted period. In the case of public service broadcasting it needs the threat of potential opposition power, as a sabre to rattle warningly at governments. Yet, as the Conservative Party won one election after another from 1979 onwards, British politics became increasingly one-party rule. Indeed, the emergence of a coherent, highly ideological project for the transformation of British politics and society after 1982 put the BBC even more under threat.

The new, Thatcherite project was highly individualistic: it argued that public interest could only be secured by maximizing the capacity of individuals to choose; and that government should seek to abandon controls, not exercise them. 'Deregulating', however, often had an ironic effect: a policy supposed to get government off people's backs often turned out, in practice, to be highly centralizing. Frequently, fiercely *dirigiste* measures of deregulation became instruments for delegitimizing, eradicating, and diminishing any institution or organization that had alternative views. In addition, the project could be a politicizing one. The fashionable neo-liberal creed often ignored cultural constraints: like scientific socialism in a different era, it was over-rational.

The New Right', as John Gray points out, 'failed to perceive the dependence of individualistic civil society on a dwindling but real patrimony of common ideas, beliefs and values.' In other words, the possibility of extreme individualism depended on the cultural, educational structures that formed active, independently minded individuals. Public service broadcasting had been founded precisely to shore up and improve the common store of ideas, values, and knowledge. Thus, the story of public service broadcasting in the 1980s and 1990s had a far wider resonance than the question of whether people watch one chat show or another. It is a story of whether a plurality of voices can survive – and at what cost – in monolithic times.

Of course, the BBC and all responsible broadcasters always are, always have been, and always will be, worried about how to deal with politicians. The problem is that recently, handling politicians has become more important than making programmes, thinking of new programmes, relating creatively to audiences, or expressing what is going on within the nation. On the other hand, only if broadcasters abandon trying to provide a comprehensive and objective schedule, and opt instead for entertainment, will the pressures cease.

In turn, all politicians seek to influence, cajole, bully, manipulate, and prejudice, if they can, how broadcasters deal with their affairs. Broadcasting is far too important to them for seemly good manners. Indeed, consideration of how the media will react is playing a larger part in political calculation than before. Policy, not just its presentation, is increasingly tuned to media reaction – despite, or perhaps because of, the declining capacity of media news organizations to interpret and process sophisticated news. In a sense, nobbling the media, however you do it, is just politics.

However, what marked out the 1980s was that political pressure assumed a new form. For the very first time since British broadcasting started in 1926, the issue became not merely what the BBC did, but whether it would survive at all. Indeed, to some members of the Conservative government, the BBC as an institution, and public service as an ideal, began to be seen as key obstacles to its attempt to revolutionize how Britain was run, and its ways of thinking. Public service was seen as the inefficient self-serving camouflage of groups who wanted to protect their own interests from the correcting force of competition. Mrs Thatcher put the case inimitably in her memoirs: 'Broadcasting was one of those areas – the professions, such as teaching, medicine and the law were others – in which special pleading by powerful interest groups was disguised as high minded commitment to some common good.'<sup>1</sup>

Regarding the BBC as an irritatingly arrogant, cosily protected establishment dinosaur, Thatcherites marked it down for eradication in the radical right cultural revolution. At first, Mrs Thatcher merely sought to harness two quite contradictory pressures to cure the BBC of the tendencies she objected to. The first consisted of the self-appointed moral regulators, such as Mrs Whitehouse's Viewers' and Listeners' Association, with vociferous support in the

middlebrow press, who argued that television was to blame for a decline in morals in the country. Public service broadcasters, the Prime Minister put it, rephrasing the words of Adam Smith, 'were claiming the rights of poetry, but providing us with a push pin'. The second consisted of the commercial interests of her most influential supporters in the press, particularly those of Rupert Murdoch (whose name and organization significantly received no mention in her memoirs). Murdoch was interested in the profits that could be made if British television was 'deregulated'. This would make it easier for his present or future chances to succeed. As his deal with Tony Blair and the Labour party showed in the run-up to the 1997 election Murdoch liked to extract maximum commercial interest from his newspapers' political power. Mrs Thatcher, however, argued that increasing competition would lead to an improvement, 'raising' standards of taste and decency. This was an odd position, because everywhere else unregulated competition had tabloidized, coarsened, and vulgarized broadcasting. Indeed, the Premiere showed a touching faith in Murdoch's capacity to raise standards – his previous contribution to halting moral decline having been the relaunch of the *Sun*.

Mrs Thatcher never saw much television, except when she was on it. However, her husband, who watched a lot, was widely reported to have given her daily resumé of its iniquities. But broadcasting happens to be almost the only industry which politicians ever see much of at work, as they slip in and out of studios. During Mrs Thatcher's premiership, College Green, a windswept triangle of grass with good shots of the Houses of Parliament behind it, virtually became part of the British, as yet unwritten constitution. College Green, and Millbank next to it, where the television stations broadcast much of their political reporting, increasingly took over from Parliament itself as the most critical area of public life, especially at times of crisis, the place where politicians hunt for attention, and journalists hunt for someone with an angle. Mrs Thatcher's observation of the television industry at work, 'too many men, too much waste!' fuelled her conviction that television embodied the hydra-headed enemy of British laxity: archaic union practices that preserved unnecessary jobs, and smug management. In contrast, print journalism caused the Conservative government few problems in the 1980s. In her first term of office, the Prime Minister gave knighthoods to the editors of the *Sun*, *Sunday Express*, and *Daily Mail*. In return, these and other newspapers softened their criticism of the government and concentrated their attacks on its enemies – a novel interpretation of the duties of the Fourth Estate. One minister asked Mrs Thatcher about her favourable press, and she replied guilelessly, 'That's because I've been so kind to them.'<sup>2</sup> She did not think broadcasters treated her fairly, nor did she set out to be nice to them.

However, there were many other aspects of broadcasting that increased tension between broadcasters and politicians during the 1980s. The Prime Minister was angered by the sceptical ways in which some broadcasters dealt with her, and she believed they were promoting an out-of-date view of the contemporary world. Bernard Ingham, her abrasive No.

10 Press Secretary, called them (the broadcasters) – the Dimplebys and Elsteins – the unelected princelings of broadcasting. Less personally, but more provocatively, in practice, public service broadcasting was not merely any one organization – it was the product of a regulated market. In the regulated market the worst economic pressures to produce the cheapest programmes for the most viewers can be counterbalanced by the requirements to be impartial, to inform, to entertain and to educate, to match the audience share of the competition, and to secure licences to broadcast. Yet the guiding idea of the 1980s, and one that has survived Mrs Thatcher's departure, was that any market regulation impeded the proper outcome of market choice. The more sophisticated interpretation of choice, according to which regulation provides a wider variety of programmes for a wider variety of audiences, was anathema to governments for whom deregulation, privatization, and the efficacy of market choice were the main instruments of reform and which had become, by the 1990s, ends in themselves. Thus the very basis of public service broadcasting made it peculiarly vulnerable to government attention.

However, it was inevitably politics that most inflamed the relationship. Sweeping government denunciations of the BBC's left-wing bias, and of alleged misreporting, and allegations against journalists, became routine. Individual presenters, television executives, journalists, particular items, and whole strands of coverage were targeted. The cumulative effects of such intimidation were profound. 'If the television of the western world uses its freedom continually to show all that is worst in our society', said Mrs Thatcher after the reporting of the riots of 1981, 'How can the uncommitted judge?'<sup>3</sup> As Hugo Young, in his biography of Mrs Thatcher, *One of Us*, argued: 'the less formal, but no less purposeful attacks, led by Mrs. Thatcher herself, on the BBC and other television broadcasters who threatened to loosen ministers' control over the agenda of the nation were ferocious.'

The Prime Minister's determination to reform broadcasting was given an added twist by the political challenges her government faced. First, she regarded much of the BBC's reporting of the Falklands War (particularly the use, on news broadcasts, of the term 'the British troops', rather than 'our troops') as almost treasonable. She was incensed by a 1983 election phone-in which included tough questions by members of the public – as she wrote 'put up, not properly edited out' – about the conduct of the war, especially the sinking of the *Belgrano*. Above all there was the reporting of Northern Ireland.

Brian Wenham, an influential BBC programme maker and bureaucrat, contemplating the evidence about one programme, *Real Lives*, which caused an early prime-ministerial explosion, later observed that 'It was usually Ireland, it was usually the BBC, it was usually a row bigger, with more heads rolling, than you'd ever think possible.'<sup>4</sup> Eddie Mirzeoff, a senior BBC producer, talked about the pervasive self-censorship to which the rows led: 'the cost was always in programmes we did not make, ideas we dare not have.'

Certainly, the government's reaction to the BBC's handling of Northern Ireland was a major factor in the growing sense of panic within the BBC during the 1980s. It was in part a battle about unspecified constitutional rights. The BBC claimed, on the basis of its obligation to be impartial and to inform, the right to include Sinn Fein, the protestant extremists, and sometimes the IRA, as voices that needed to be heard. While the government claimed the political right to exclude from the BBC voices which they thought had to change in order to win a right to a voice. The government always interpreted exposure as endorsement. 'Publicity', said Mrs Thatcher famously, 'is the oxygen of terrorism.'

Mrs Thatcher often gave the impression that broadcasters existed to support her, correct, views. If they gave airtime to other points of view they were, in effect, opposing her. As she had been elected and they had not, her views were legitimate, those of others were not. Impartiality – even over as intractable and complex an issue as Northern Ireland – was seen as a mischievous disguise for disloyalty. Time and again, broadcasters offended her over their handling of the issue: indeed, they were bound to. Mrs Thatcher's feelings on this issue need exploring, for they ran high. That they did so was understandable. Shortly after she was elected, the MP Airey Neave, a close friend and confidant since Mrs Thatcher had been an aspiring, unmarried young lawyer in the 1940s, was blown up by the INLA, a splinter faction of the IRA. The BBC screened an interview with an INLA representative, who triumphantly boasted of the achievement. Many found the interview offensive, but revealing. Mrs Thatcher, mistakenly, saw it as support for INLA views. Later, in 1984, she and her husband survived an IRA bomb in the hotel where she was staying for the Conservative Party Conference. Perhaps not surprisingly, an intolerance of argument over Northern Ireland ossified into a narrow-minded zeal. Many observed that the bombing had profoundly changed her.

Thereafter, almost any television reporting in this area seemed to add to her fury. A number of incidents were interpreted as further evidence of subversion. There was the initial refusal of the BBC to hand over its film of the terrible mob lynching of two plain clothes policemen; there were interviews with members of the IRA; there were attempts to include IRA and protestant community political representatives in studio discussions; there were conflicts over a series of programmes – *Real Lives*, *A Question of Ulster*, *Death on the Rock* – which increased tension between broadcasters and politicians. After the Prime Minister had seen, and been enraged by, *Real Lives*, a programme which showed the 'everyday' lives and families of a Protestant and a Sinn Fein extremist, the Broadcasting Ban was imposed. This meant that when members of terrorist groups appeared on television, their voices could not be heard and actors had to read their words. This ban did nothing to reduce public interest in paramilitary personalities. It did, however, constitute a humiliation to the public service broadcasters, as it was little more than a visible badge of government power. It also meant that



television executives did not make programmes about Northern Ireland if they could help it. However, the long-running Ulster saga did not go away, and its existence meant that government hostility to public service broadcasting continued to be underpinned by the Prime Minister's fierce passion about the issue.

In addition to this, the war on the 'complacent' public service tradition was ardently supported by a range of newspapers. The *News of the World* called the BBC 'The Boring Bonkers Corporation', The *Mail* said it was '(utterly) Biased (morally) Bankrupt and (politically) Corrupt'. The lead, however, in BBC bashing was provided by the *Sun*, *The Times* and the *Sunday Times*, shock troops of Thatcherism in its Maoist phase. The *Sun* described the BBC on one day as being 'Boring Old Auntie', and on the very next day accused it of 'Sleaze and Sluttery'. Broadcasting was attacked for loose morals, extravagance, fifth columnism and offending against public taste. *The Times*, for the first time since the Abdication crisis, ran editorials on three consecutive days to the same theme: the inadequacy of the BBC. However, as newspapers, unlike MPs, are not required to declare an interest, none of these scions of Murdoch's News International felt called upon to mention that their proprietor happened to have growing ambitions for his satellite television stations. In every sphere, from the domestic British to the international market, the BBC and the BBC's World Service, and more generally the constraints of public service programming, with its emphasis on programme diversity and impartiality, stood in the way of News International. And indeed, anyone who stood in the way of the party most likely to deliver policies friendly to News International was also an enemy. As William Shawcross shows in his biography, Rupert Murdoch has little or no interest in news or programming, and while he routinely 'asset strips' news rooms, he has seldom invested in media content. His interest in politics tended to reflect the needs of his businesses: beyond that he was apolitical. Thus the News International campaigns against the existing broadcasting arrangements increased in parallel with the Corporation's interest in satellite. The *Sun's* shrill demand that 'Aunty Must Go' was a pragmatic piece of commercial lobbying.

As if this fetid brew of political and economic hostility were not enough to seal the fate of the BBC, technological and social developments in satellite and cable broadcasting would have meant that any administration would have had to consider how to handle changes to what had been a relatively stable competition which had developed between ITV and the BBC over thirty years. Whatever happened, the 'du-opoly' of public service broadcasters would have been bound to face considerable competitive challenge for audiences by the end of the decade. The adjustment, the possibilities, the role of 'public service' advantages in these changes were not inevitable. Different policies would have different outcomes, but a period of rapid and potentially difficult change was unavoidable.

Moreover, the era of public service broadcasting also seemed to have passed throughout the world. In many countries it appeared that 'public service' channels, of varying strengths

and success, were being obliged to take on advertising, faced rapidly declining audience shares, and suffered a loss of authority. Even in sympathetic political climates, like those of Scandinavia and the old Commonwealth, public service broadcasters found it difficult to maintain distinctive broadcasting values. The sense of a regulated diet of programmes, even the sense of a scheduled progression of programmes and predictable audiences, looked as if it might fray or even disappear once the public had a larger choice of channels to choose from, and more things to do with their television sets.

All over the world in the 1980s, public service channels were being deregulated and as a result saw their audiences collapse. Some even began to suggest that in any case the heyday of television had passed. The very peculiar capacity of the medium to assemble, address, and touch the emotions of huge national audiences simultaneously seemed to be disappearing. Television had become one component of a huge entertainment industry that now included music, films, videos, and the rapidly expanding computer market. Commentators began to suggest that television had lost its dominating cultural role. However, most people continued to watch television regularly. It was perhaps more accurate to say it was the power of the television corporations, the programmes, and schedules which were changing.

Thus the alliance of political and commercial interests, arraigned against public service broadcasting in the mid-1980s, looked overwhelming. The radical ideas of right-wing think-tanks such as the Institute of Economic Affairs and the Adam Smith Institute, criticized for their extremism and impracticability in the early part of the decade, seemed positively mainstream and cautious later. In particular, they advocated the break-up of the BBC, the superiority of advertising revenue over licensing revenue, and the benefit of consumer 'choice' through increased channel availability. They argued that regulation was unnecessary, and praised the role of auctions in allocating commercial broadcasting licenses. It was not just that the political climate had changed; everything that had previously been a source of protection for public service broadcasting suddenly made it vulnerable. The BBC was, as the decade progressed, under sustained commercial and political threat as never before.

### **Government attacks**

How did the government go about 'dealing with the problem of the BBC' – the issue that Mrs Thatcher was so determined to address? The first line of attack was political. Part of the 'consensus' that Mrs Thatcher's administration set out to change was the idea that appointments to public bodies, such as the BBC's Board of Governors, should be more or less bipartisan. Prime ministers and home secretaries had, of course, liked to exercise choice in these appointments in the past. Thus, Harold Wilson had appointed the ITV Chairman,

Charles Hill, as BBC Chairman in 1971 to bring the Corporation to heel. However, even Hill could not be regarded as a party political placement; he had been a Conservative, not a Labour minister.

The Conservative government believed that such delicacy on such a point was unnecessary, and indeed inefficient. If the BBC was to be encouraged to be friendly towards the government's project, you needed to be sure of the loyalty of those who ran it. Hence, during the 1980s, appointments to the BBC's Board of Governors became increasingly politicized. Qualified but unsympathetic candidates were not appointed, while ill qualified ones were – a process of committee management which indeed applied to many other public bodies as well. Hugo Young in his biography of Mrs Thatcher quotes a colleague: 'Margaret usually asked "Is he one of us?" before approving an appointment.' It was the appointment of sympathetic chairmen of the Governors that gave the government its real power over the BBC. The first Chairman appointed by the new administration was Stuart Young who happened to be the brother of a Conservative government minister. However, he showed signs of going native on the BBC. His successor, Marmaduke Hussey, was made of sterner stuff. Hussey, an ebullient Second World War veteran, had no background in broadcasting, had come straight from being the Chairman of Times Newspapers, where his confrontation with the unions had helped to change Fleet Street, but had also led to the paper being closed for a year. One of his qualifications may have been that he had worked for Murdoch and, in a sense, was unlikely therefore to cause Murdoch problems. A charming, forceful man, he saw his Chairmanship as a full-time job to 'sort out the BBC'. Over the next decade, he oversaw all the major changes in the Corporation, brutally dismissed one director general, shabbily pushed aside the next, and appointed the third, John Birt, without even advertising the job, or considering other candidates. Coming from newspapers, he treated the BBC, one critic remarked, 'rather as if he had owned it'. He was treated with a fearful deference by the Corporation until the end of his reign.

Hussey's influence was supposedly balanced by that of his deputy Lord Joel Barnet, a former Labour Treasury Minister who also chose to work at the BBC on a full-time basis. Barnet, however, accepted much of the Hussey diagnosis, and once even acknowledged that he did not, in practice, represent any difference in view from Hussey. Meanwhile, the Board of Governors, one critic commented, came to represent 'an unfortunate combination of low calibre and high prejudice'.

Of course, the 'packing' of boards, and in turn the administration of increasingly large tracts of contemporary life by committees and quangos rather than by elected government had been an article of faith of the Conservative reforms. One argument was that there should be a move from 'representative' boards of directors, chosen because, however loosely, they stood for specific interests (in the BBC this might mean the regions, or writers, or women or

educators) to so-called 'corporate boards', where individuals were selected on their merits. Well managed, this could be a useful development. In practice, however, it was taken to mean that members should be chosen for their adherence to an agenda. Indeed, against a background of mounting unease about the impact of some of these ideas on the quality of services, in 1994 the Nolan Committee on Standards in Public Life was asked to address the problem of whether the perceived bias in public appointments was a media-induced mirage – or a real issue. Nolan concluded that there was clear evidence of a political bias in those who had been appointed: 'individuals who are Conservative Party supporters, or whose companies donate to the Conservative Party, are more likely to be found on appointed boards, than those who support Labour or the Liberal Democrats'.<sup>5</sup> The report also recommended that when 'individuals had political interests they ought always to be declared.' The Committee recommended that an independent commissioner should oversee all such appointments. Nolan's 'public service' ethic incorporated the values of selflessness, integrity, objectivity, accountability, openness, honesty, and leadership. In the case of the BBC there was evidence of direct interference in appointments to the Board of Governors and, perhaps more importantly than Nolan's virtuous criteria, individuals were nearly always selected for their compliance, and never for their independence.

With the Chairmanship in a safe pair of hands, and a politically packed Board of Governors, the Government had a Trojan horse to take their policies right to the centre of the Corporation. There was a dramatic shift of power inside the BBC, with the Chairmen and the Board of Governors extending their power and interfering over an increasingly wide area. The Board of Governors is, constitutionally, the BBC, and as such has an immense authority within the Corporation: to have a Board that was hostile to everything the Corporation had done was deeply demoralizing. The first casualty was the independent-minded representative of an Olympian BBC tradition and elegant draughtsman of memoranda, the Director General, Alisdair Milne. In his memoirs Milne laid down his battle credits: a succession of brilliant, innovative programmes, whose object had been first, in *Tonight*, a hugely successful news magazine, to get on a level of conversation with viewers, and famously, in *TW3*, the pioneering satire show, 'to address, late on a Saturday night, people who are more aware of being persons and more aware of being citizens than at any other time of the week'. He had defined the job of Director General as being to engineer a harmonious relationship with the Chairman and, above all, 'to provide a climate of confidence in which programme makers can do their best work'.<sup>6</sup> Milne was certainly not able to achieve harmony with Hussey, nor was he able to control a sense of mounting hysteria in the BBC. Personality always plays a part in appointments and dismissals, and Milne and Hussey did not get on, partly for the good reason that Hussey regarded Milne as part of 'the problem' he had been sent in to sort out. Milne was peremptorily sacked. The first he knew of his departure was when, in a lunch break between

meetings, Patricia Hodgson, the BBC's Secretary ('carved from deep frozen Oil of Ulay', according to one wit) used his Christian name – not the usual DG – in asking him to see Hussey, who disposed of him and told him to leave the building, in which he had worked for over thirty years, by tea-time. Milne was succeeded as Director General by Michael Checkland – an accountant who had never made a programme but who had nevertheless worked for the BBC for many years, and who was known for his prudent capacity to save money, and more interestingly, to save it to spend wisely on important projects. Checkland was finally replaced by John Birt, first as Deputy Director General, and then as his replacement. Mrs Thatcher's memoirs icily assert that 'the appointment of Duke Hussey, and later of John Birt, as Director General represented an improvement in every respect'. At last she apparently had her men in place.

During the late 1980s and 1990s it was widely believed that the governors of the BBC were working behind the scenes to make programme makers not so much yield to government pressure as to make it unnecessary. In many ways this was part of the new managerialism: managers and boards were not merely required to take hard decisions, but there was a macho-pride to be taken in making these decisions as unpleasant as possible. In part, of course, this was merely an attempt to browbeat groups of people with values, or indeed the social capital of respect, into compliance. It was part of a far wider plan to limit the authority of professionals. However, it was also, in itself, an expression of the new orthodoxy: to manage properly it had to hurt.

The second line of Conservative attack on the BBC was, of course, the licence fee. When there are periods of 'natural' revenue expansion, when television ownership was increasing, or there was a switch to colour licences, when the BBC's funds increase because of a change in demand for its services, the Corporation has greater independence. There was no such natural increase in the 1980s, and television production costs were rising faster than general inflation. Thus, simply by not raising the licence fee, the government could impose savage cuts on the Corporation. Most prime ministers have probably warned the BBC's director generals that the licence fee would be cut. Most have not, in the end, meant it. During the 1980s and 1990s, the fee was eroded by a government that was intent on changing the nature of the BBC. Having abandoned their original ambition simply to abolish the Corporation, the government determined to exert its power, not only by interfering with the licence fee, but also by changing expectations, and radically altering the ecology of broadcasting institutions within which the BBC works. The aim was to change the kind of institution that the BBC aspired to be. Death by beheading was to be replaced by death by salami cuts. There had been no doubt, among politicians on both sides and in pressure groups, that the object of the 1990 Broadcasting Act had been intended to be the destruction of the BBC. Peacock had not put advertisements on the screen and although, by the late 1980s, as the next recession hit, the last

thing any commercial station or indeed even any advertiser wanted, was more broadcast advertising time; nevertheless, having been thwarted once, 'this time the feeling was', commented one politician, 'we'll get them'. The likelihood that the Corporation would disappear, its dominance undermined, and its capacity to think, create and win audiences, was high.

### **Survival or sea change?**

Yet the BBC, despite the most determined onslaught it has ever faced, is still here. There are no advertisements in its programmes. Its market share, if threatened, is still large. Although it is not in the position it might have been to lead a transformation in British industrial fortunes had governments been more foresightful, it is nevertheless still an important international force, and could be more so. It is still making an astonishingly wide range of programmes that people want to watch. Indeed, in the mid-1990s, conventional 'old-style' public service programmes in the sense of television which reflects and moulds public taste, which innovates and educates, pleases and irritates, are still, so far, vigorously alive, at least in some parts of a radically transformed broadcasting landscape.

The BBC has been understandably reluctant to point out that it has, up to a point, won. It would not have been tactful. Yet, as Anthony Smith, one architect of Channel 4, remarked afterwards: 'It was a miracle. All the fire was deflected from the BBC on to ITV – the opposition got it.' And when the Broadcasting Act was finally passed it was indeed commercial television – the partner in a public service duopoly – that undoubtedly took the brunt of assault. Lord Thompson – a previous Chairman of the IBA – ruefully pointed out: 'When the BBC needed help, we gave it. But they kept their head down when we were under attack.'

Thus, from one point of view, the Conservative rule is an intriguing story of the BBC's machiavellian success. The one that got away.

The campaign was started by Brian Wenham's masterly organization of the BBC's evidence to the Peacock Committee. It developed through Extending Choice (that characteristic product of managerialism, the BBC's mission statement), through Producer Choice (the introduction of internal markets) and a continued process of management reorganization. The BBC ducked and weaved in every way it could. Using reform both as an expedient political face-saver, and sometimes as a real agent of necessary change. Thus, despite the strong pro-government bias on the Board of Governors (who seemed to dislike much of what the Corporation did, and who beguilingly claimed to be 'often too busy actually to watch television'), despite the animus of a very directed Prime Minister, and despite the pressure on revenue, the BBC survived. In this light, Hussey, Birt, and all the rest are not villains but, on the contrary, heroes, doing what had to be done, or doing what had to be seen to be done, and radically propelling the BBC along the road to a real future.

But what BBC, for what purposes, and at what cost, survived? Most popular accounts of the reforms emphasize their costs and consequences. In two powerfully argued and sharply contrasting books, Chris Horrie and Andrew Clarke's *Fear and Loathing at the BBC*, and Steve Barnett and Andrew Curry's *The Battle for the BBC*,<sup>7</sup> it is suggested that at the very least the process of reform in the BBC was awkward, ruthless, inefficient, unhappy, and self-destructive – and that, in the end, the Corporation only survived by voluntarily and lavishly doing to itself almost everything a hostile government wanted. Indeed, the debate is similar to one that recently raged amongst art historians, discussing the fate of much great medieval painting and sculpture during the Reformation, when previously sacred images were seen as idolatrous and attacked. It has been suggested that many great works were saved from the image breakers by being *slightly* defaced. A nose or an eye were sacrificed, say some, to save the whole. Others argue that on the contrary, the sense and purpose of the whole was lost by the defacement and that afterwards the images simply decayed and fell apart. Is that what has happened at the BBC? A limb or two has gone, but the whole preserved? Or, on the contrary, have we begun to see a process that will, in the end, though not quite yet, unwind, unravel, and so change the whole institution and its purposes that it will, in effect, have committed irreversible mutilation? Will it have taken with it all the aspirations, and habits, ways of doing business and thinking that can make great television sometimes possible? Is the BBC now really a ghost of its previous self? Is the BBC now a large – perhaps overlarge – broadcaster, but one pursuing profit, monetary targets, and just like any other broadcaster? Is it now as a consequence no different from them: an unfairly privileged shadow of its former self?

Another version of this account is that the quite horrible means by which the BBC secured change, the ruthless exclusion of alternative voices in the process, the application of management and production targets, the process by which, far from becoming less bureaucratic it has become (like many other institutions) far more top-heavy, were all instituted, not to make better programmes but to deal with politics. Dissent, argument, creativity, such an account suggests, are the source of vigorous and creative programmes. Most people who have left the BBC now have little good to say for it. But then, on the other hand, their accounts may be biased.

Indeed, did the BBC enter a period of hectic change, which accelerated in the 1990s, in order to make better programmes, or to make the organization more acceptable to the government? Or was the object of the changes to make the organization more sensitive to the centralized control of the Director General? What was the point of the changes – and did they secure survival at too great a cost? Has the BBC now forgotten its own history and embarked on a period – like so many other English institutions – of permanent revolution, but without aim or purpose?

### **Managers and the media**

There is, first of all, no doubt that the organization needed an overhaul. A British Steel manager invited to talk to the BBC in the early 1980s said that he came away convinced that something had to change. The Corporation was over-bureaucratic, too large, too cumbersome. It did not, he added, feel like a modern, slim, confident organization.<sup>8</sup> Management was the big 1980s idea, and institutions, businesses, and services throughout the nation were adjured to 'manage' themselves better.

However, the BBC had, in the past, been rather good at 'management'; indeed, when the Corporation was first set up, 'public service management' had itself been a huge innovation and was much praised and copied as a valuable new way of running an enterprise. Indeed, Ian MacIntyre in his biography points out that the first Director General, Reith, came to the BBC precisely as a manager, one with the highly relevant experience acquired on active service in World War One, where his job had been to improve the quality of the hugely increased productivity of mass-produced American armaments factories. The BBC had grown fast and gone on growing, because it was always an organization that took management seriously. On the other hand, 'management' within the Corporation was originally carefully separated from 'programmes'. 'Good Management', wrote Reith, 'is what is necessary to provide the conditions in which good programmes – far more important – can be made.'

During the early post-World War Two period, the BBC's response, both to staff shortages and to production problems, had been increasingly to assimilate wider aspects of the production process into the organization. The BBC had grown. Of course, the trend had been present since the BBC began, when, in order to have sound engineers or to build adequate transmitters, the Corporation had found that it had to train them itself: its problems were too specialized for the general level of technical training provided by the market. However, with the emergence of television, the process accelerated. The BBC instigated make-up and make-up training, set-building, lighting, costume design, studio design, studio space, and more and more engineering within the Corporation as it found it needed them. In so doing the BBC both established production standards and became the main provider of training for the entire broadcasting industry. Although it could be argued that this had been an important infrastructure for broadcasting in Britain and that the industry was a vital one, nevertheless, as money got tighter, it became harder for the BBC to continue to be such a generous patron. The sense of an over-staffed, over-protected, over-bureaucratic corporation made the BBC vulnerable to calls for reform.

However, one of the difficulties in analysing the impact of 1980s managerialism on the purpose and function of institutions like the BBC is that quite separate problems and solutions were deliberately confused in the project 'to manage better'. The first aim was to make sure



that resources were used efficiently. There might even have been the intention to make it a more focused, 'better managed' place. However, the second aim was to reduce dissent within organizations, while the third was to demonstrate that organizations were willing to be 'managed' better. In a rite of passage, it became a ritual of the Thatcherite cultural revolution that organizations like the BBC should admit their guilt, and perform acts of contrition and expiation before finally emerging, to use the fashionable managerial jargon, 're-tooled'. It was not merely that the BBC required direction and change, but that it was necessary that these should be seen to be difficult and that the end result should be a 'new' BBC.

The real problem, of course, is how you measure improvement in management in an organization like the BBC. As John Harvey Jones, the former Chairman of ICI and a prominent management 'guru' of the 1980s pointed out, organizations have to change continually, and better management should mean greater scope for entrepreneurial innovation. But who are the 'entrepreneurs' in a broadcasting empire – the managers or the programme makers? Moreover, the BBC, like any large and old organization, has been perpetually reorganized ever since it was founded. In the early 1970s it had already undergone four major organizational changes in forty years. In the beginning, 'administration' had been firmly separated from programme making and output, and indeed the separation had become 'an article of faith', remaining as a convenient fiction as late as the 1970s. When Tom Burns talked to the top levels of the BBC hierarchy in the late 1960s for his book, several complained that 'Managers were seen by everyone else as lepers'. Managers and administration were still far less important than programmes. It was still the roll-call of good, innovative, successful programmes that really ambitious broadcasting careers were made from. Burns reported one respondent as saying, 'Everybody in the Corporation, I suspect, sneakingly wants to get nearer and nearer to programmes, and I think, too, that one is always frightened as an administrator of stopping something.'<sup>9</sup> For the ambitious and driven, the pull, the gravitas in broadcasting was through making programmes, and remained so until the late 1980s. Yet the reality was changing. By then, the people who made programmes were far less important than the people who did the accounting for programmes.

Running a modern broadcasting organization almost inevitably develops a tension between industrialization and craft production. A great deal of television is in effect mass produced, falling into a narrow range of categories, sit-coms, game shows, chat shows, soap operas, and so on. There are also other more idiosyncratic kinds of programme. However, there is always pressure to reduce costs and standardize production. As we have seen, this became more acute during the 1980s. Nevertheless, within these constraints the challenge is to produce novel, intriguing, stimulating, fun, serious, enlightening programmes. Such creative products will always in part be a product of a culture, ways of thinking, a rewards system – what actually gets you on, and ultimately the kinds of personality that survive best

in a system. Thus the question of creativity is never simply one of resources – although television is costly, both in terms of money and organizational needs. Nevertheless, the difference between good and indifferent programmes is one of giving permission and receiving encouragement.

One mounting pressure as the 1980s moved on was a sense not so much of permanent revolution as of permanent hysteria within the BBC. One young current affairs journalist, just down from Oxford, described it as ‘a very volatile panicky place’, where crises were always breaking out. After the Birt reforms, everything was much calmer: ‘there was a steady drip, drip of pressure, but not the sense that matters would ricochet out of hand’.<sup>10</sup>

The BBC entered the process of being reformed with a naturally articulate and vociferous staff. The journalist recalled meetings in the BBC canteen at Lime Grove, an old labyrinthine building where news and current events were produced, ripe with corners for conspiracies, ‘where producers screamed and management cowered’. Indeed, John Birt’s initiation into the Lime Grove experience, confronting angry producers assembled to hear his plans, is said to have rocked him by its unrestrained hostility. He returned from the meeting determined to change the culture, no doubt to change the people, and while he was about it to pull down the building – and to call in the management consultants.

### **Managers and management**

The BBC called in four different firms of management consultants to oversee its reform during the late 1980s and 1990s. Such advice is not cheap. Such people do not make programmes. What do management consultants do? Ideally, they enable an organization to do what it does better, or they may help it to change what it does. This may be all very desirable and, as we have seen, the BBC may have needed something like it. However, management consultants tend, on the whole, to accentuate the role of managers. In a widget industry, managers, not workers, may be the people who create new opportunities for the firm. This is only partly true in broadcasting, where the people who make things make the opportunities. There was a radical shift in power within the BBC: what had been a producers’ programmed hierarchy became a management-led power structure.

Titles and salaries illustrate this trend. Thus, when an outstanding head of radio drama resigned, his job was replaced by that of a drama business unit manager. The change in title reflected a change in priorities, and a shift in the kinds of talents apparently required. Another indicator was that the salaries paid to the exhausting front line current event and news personnel, who in a real sense are the BBC ‘face to the world’, between 1980 and 1995 fell from having been equal to those of comparable managers to being less than one-third. Inevitably, management-led organizations recruit people who want to be managers.

The consultants, apart from harassing liberal-minded producers into line for the government, were also widely believed to be there less ‘to make the organization run more efficiently’, and more to increase the Director General’s control over unruly troops. Certainly, one of the things management consultants can do is describe in apparently uncontested, neutral, and pseudo-technocratic terms, the apparently inevitable necessity of doing what those who call on them want. Of course, in order to meet the government’s onslaught greater discipline was probably necessary.

Yet management became increasingly fashionable and important during the 1980s. Many believed that better management was an instrument which could reform ailing British institutions and habits. Those in apparently radical think-tanks – such as Demos – endorsed the desirability of wholesale changes to the organization of institutions, and a steady stream of political pamphlets discussed efficiency, and how to measure outcomes. Indeed, for those organizations that were wealthy enough to measure what their impact was, it was a useful tool. ‘Modernization’ became synonymous with change brought in from outside an organization. The emphasis in whole rafts of social thinking moved from what kind of services were desirable to how they were to be delivered. Under this there was also – as is usual – a political change in emphasis. The ‘new managerialism’ substituted a legitimate concern for the efficiency of the process of production for an older and perhaps also legitimate question about distribution.

One of the problems in assessing the effect of these ideas was that there was an element of genuine utopianism in some of the thinking. Thus Charles Handy, a humane and liberal management guru, produced a series of ideas for the reform of organization which he saw as both desirable for management and liberating for individuals. Later he was to ruefully acknowledge that their outcome – in practice – was often disastrous.

Some new principles of management were enthusiastically applied to enterprises everywhere. The first was the ‘death of organization’. Handy had written that ‘the telephone makes it possible for people to work together without being in the same place’.<sup>11</sup> He went on to consider the impact of communication changes and said that organizations, institutions, offices, careers, were all fast becoming irrelevant. It was not merely that commerce would become leaner – a new radical division of labour should be developed. You could be liberated from the inflexible institution because its work would change more rapidly. Businesses should become increasingly ‘federal’, buying in and commissioning specialized work as they needed it: ‘Life in more and more organizations is going to resemble a consultancy firm’ he claimed. Handy’s optimistic Utopian vision of a new social order, with individuals freed from jobs and companies, and in charge of their own work destiny as never before, included a claim that in future hierarchies would be old hat, organizations would be ‘flat’; workers, he claimed, would ‘have a right to do their own things in their own way as long as it is in the common

interest, that people need to be well informed, well intentioned, and well educated in order to interpret their common interest.'

Handy's ideas suited the BBC well. The Corporation faced savage financial cuts, and the consequences of the 1990 Broadcasting Act – that it eventually commission 25 per cent of its programmes from outside the Corporation in the independent producers' sector. A plan for forcing through some drastic reorganization was needed and the new managerialism looked one way forward. Such reform was also, no doubt, seductive, because despite Handy's vision, delayering, federalist, re-tooled organization also happened to provide the upper of the hierarchies that survived with hugely increased powers.

Why did the BBC bother with all the management hoo-ha, and not just cut bits off? The benign interpretation is that management wanted to make sure it got rid of the right – that is the worst – bits. The more sceptical view is that they wanted to legitimate what they did. The least attractive view is that, although there were endless meetings, guidelines, mission statements, and flow charts, they had no clear vision of what a streamlined 'better' BBC would be like – except that it should be more docile and smaller; but perhaps they were trying to find out.

The process began slowly but gathered speed. Indeed, when Mrs Thatcher was replaced by decent Mr Major, the BBC juggernaut of reform went right on rolling. Part of the incentive for reform came from the need to cut production costs, and to use plant and people more efficiently. This led to the 'TV Resource Study', which started from the assumption that regional BBC plant was under-used and should be 'reorganized', i.e. that some of it should be shut down and that expensive London plant ought to be better used or disposed of. More to the point, perhaps, the management consultants suggested that 'plant', television studios, and the resources and people should be utilized on a twenty-four hour-a-day, seven-day-a-week schedule. This plan, jauntily entitled 'The Twenty Four Hour Rolling News Day' claimed to be about a 'new concept in news readiness'. In fact, one critic claimed that its primary target was the rewriting of staff contracts. In the past, long hours had meant overtime payment; in the future they meant just that, long hours.

The structural supports now seen as 'irrelevant' or surplus were lopped wholesale. However, the problem was whether the way in which cuts were made was rational or even cost-effective. Expensive new Manchester studios were 'disposed' of before they even opened. Elstree Studios, tatty but fertile in programmes, were deemed to have the wrong image, and sold. But the 'TV Resource Study' was the place where the real motor of BBC reforms was invented. At first it was called the 'internal market', but a public relations alarm bell rang, and a special brainstorming session was set up to think of something better. It came up with 'Producers' Choice'.

This title, instantly recognizable as another example of ‘Newspeak’, sounded positive, programme centred, something you’d like to have. It did not sound like lots of meetings, lots of invoices, and the ‘wholesale transformation of perfectly good programme makers into second rate accountants’,<sup>12</sup> which is how one producer described it.

‘Producers’ Choice’ was intended, like the other artificial internal markets of the 1990s, to make costs transparent. In the past, not only had there been a good deal of cross-subsidization within budgets, but also many of the resources used in making programmes – studios, training, and so on – had been paid for centrally. The new stern philosophy in public affairs argued that this led to waste and extravagance because the true costs of using any resource were disguised. ‘Producers’ Choice’ was supposed to make the real costs of making programmes apparent. However, it was also intended as a mechanism that would discreetly dispose of parts of the organization. So producers, having been allocated budgets, had to buy in the services they needed as cheaply as they could. That the real purpose of the exercise was to shut departments was made clear by the simple diktat that, while producers were encouraged to look outside the BBC for services, production departments were prohibited from trying to sell their services beyond the Corporation.

The trouble with artificially constructed internal markets – in all institutions – is that while they may drive down the costs of the central activity of the institution (replacing hips, teaching students, making programmes), they also require much of their resources to be spent on accounting and monitoring financial systems. They redistribute resources away from the central activity. Producers (like teachers, nurses, doctors, and so on) spent more of their time than was congenial, possibly a great deal more than was efficient, filling in forms and sending out invoices. Power usually flows from where the money is used – and so there was a further shift in power within the organization. In the early 1990s the staff magazine and the national press were full of BBC job advertisements: ‘financial assistants’, ‘accountants’, ‘financial controllers’ were much in demand. Many of the management consultants brought in from outside jumped ship and became BBC managers instead, not programme makers.

The second part of the agenda was to make the BBC more orderly. Was this a necessity in order to bring the Corporation into line with Conservative ideology so that it might survive, or did it, as some have claimed, bring about a collapse of traditional BBC values? John Harvey Jones, the great industrialist, in his gospel of management, *Making It Happen*, comments:

‘our forebears have given our companies a tradition of open speaking and respect for differences of opinion which is, in my view, the most precious single inheritance we have. There is no way in which a vision of the future can be developed amongst a group of people unless they have a very high degree of toleration, and indeed enthusiasm for argument.’<sup>13</sup>

Toleration was not a word that many felt characterized discussions in the BBC in the 1990s.

Indeed, it was as if the BBC tried to, or was forced to, mirror the style of government – as well as doing what the government wanted. Despite Harvey Jones's principles of open-mindedness, new managerial theories undoubtedly provide organizations with powerful tools for ridding themselves of dissent. As Michael Grade, the Director of Channel 4, put it at an Edinburgh Television Festival lecture, at the height of febrile tension with the Corporation, 'the latest jargon inside the BBC speaks of "downsizing", "delaying", and "outsourcing" . . . and that's closure, redundancy and dark studios to you and me.' The new management style was, he said, Leninist and ruthlessly silenced argument. Grade, Director of Channel 4, an ex-BBC Comptroller, and a competitor with Birt, one of the several people who believed they could do Birt's job better than Birt, certainly relished the opportunity to savage the new BBC team. Yet, as a programme enthusiast – a showfinder with an eye for success but a passion for good television – he knew how critical the BBC was for the whole ecology of broadcasting. The BBC, he said, kept programme makers honest.

A guiding tenet of the new managerialism was that long-term careers within organizations are bad: not so much for people, but for organizations. Anyone who actually stays with an organization must be a dullard. People were supposed to hop from job to job. Indeed, there is now almost a cult of the 'outsider'. In the late 1960s, when Tom Burns was writing his book, most people within the BBC could think of their own long-term interests and those of the Corporation together. Although competition with ITV, and then Channel 4, gave individuals real freedom and flexibility, nevertheless they could focus ambition, groom experience, have expectations, and calculate.

However, in the 1990s BBC staff turnover rocketed. People came into the Corporation – and left fast. Having finished with the technical support staff, the managers turned to those working in production. Greg Dyke, a programme maker and director of LWT who more recently went to work for Pearsons, throughout the 1980s an overt supporter of Mrs Thatcher (while remaining, it emerged in the mid-1990s, a covert Labour partisan), fresh from his experience of cutting staff at LWT (an organization about one-twentieth the size of the BBC and which made about one-hundredth of the amount of programmes), advised the Corporation: 'don't cut at staff, hack and hack again at them.' The BBC needed to cut staff to cut costs. Yet, by the mid-1990s, few had careers within it of longer than five years – (apart from the Director General, who had his contract renewed (and therefore proposed to stay at least ten years) and Duke Hussey, the Chairman (who also stayed for a decade). By 1995 many staff were, in effect, pieceworkers or employed on short-term contracts. Indeed, one malcontent observed that the arrival of the managers had led to the BBC's Katyan Forrest, referring to the massacre of Polish officers and leaders by the Russians and: 'the slaughter of the entire Corporation officer class.'

During the 1990s, the BBC became a rich source of baroque fables about the impact of 'managerialism' on an articulate and competitive group of people and, moreover, a group well able to mobilize publicity on their own behalf. The conflict between the managers and staff often represented a battle about words. Language and the problems of its use had always taken a concrete form in broadcasting. Indeed, the early history of the medium was of the slow, cautious licensing of spoken ad-libbed speech, as opposed to scripted language. The use of scripts had been both a means of social and political control, ensuring that dangerous, untoward, or offensive things did not get said, and it had also been a way of refining and attending to the impact of speech. Only very gradually were people's own voices and words permitted on air, legitimizing new points of view in public debate. Today, there is more unscripted broadcasting than ever. Nevertheless, the meaning and impact of language remains a vital and delicate part of broadcasting culture. Words matter to journalists, and are what their work depends upon. As BBC journalists are not yet at the tabloid end of the market, they use words to describe, identify, and discriminate.

Yet, one of the consequences of the new managerialism is the use of words for obfuscation rather than clarification. The use of words to disguise intention rather than to reveal it. It seemed to many that everything had to be translated into a new vocabulary: long-winded, tedious, pompous, technocratic. Journalists loathed the corrosion of words. A disgruntled wit called the new language 'Birtspeak'. It was easy to assume it had a purpose. As Grade added in his speech, 'the staff of the BBC are afraid to speak publicly unless every word has been cleared by the BBC's own thought police. The silence is eerie, ominous!' Journalists responded with a plethora of jokes, pillorying management.

The management revolution at the BBC, as everywhere else, meant interminable meetings. It also created many examples of that newly fashionable ritual – the management 'away day'. This was accompanied by enforced 'joie d'esprit' involving strange settings (once in a marquee, disconcertingly like a big top), which disguised the reality that real jobs, futures, the nature of the BBC, were all on the line. What gave rise to bitter jokes was the perverse distance between the ostensible intent and the manner of these events – the supposed 'open' discussion, 'exchange of views', jolly team spirit-building, and what was seen to be their real purpose, the identification and exclusion of opponents. Indeed, what journalists felt they reacted to was the undermining of language as a means of describing reality.

Paradoxically, just as the Cold War was coming to an end the worst excesses of Eastern European administration seemed to pop up in managerialism in many British institutions. Opponents claimed that what the BBC began to be good at producing was brochures and mission statements, plans, objectives, and position documents. Nevertheless, all these refocused attention within the Corporation. However, Bill Cotton, the hard-headed yet

reform-minded Head of BBC1 in the early 1990s, always argued that the only political defence the BBC needed to worry about was the popularity of its programmes with the audience. That was by far its best protection.

### History and managers

Another aspect of 1980s managerialism was a contempt for history, and a cavalier rewriting of it. Of course, this may, in part, be necessary. The world changes: concern for how things were done may be an impediment to how they must now be done. On the other hand, institutions only really function at their best if people working in them want to do more rather than less than is necessary. Tradition and history – values even – and a pride in what has been done well can be invaluable stimulants to ambition. Institutions also have to remember their history so that they do not repeat their mistakes. The past can be a resource for the future, not just a hindrance to it.

Yet, within the BBC, ‘looking back’ was seen as being a characteristic of the ‘old guard’, the people who had run the Corporation in the inefficient past. To say why things had been done as they had, or to query the logic of innovation (for example, of spending a lot of time and money attempting to create a ‘price’ for studio time, when there was in no real sense a market for it) was to ‘mark you down as a doomed, old-speak person’, recalled one veteran. ‘The past was a very dangerous place to mention’, maintained another.<sup>14</sup>

But perhaps all the hostility to change was just part of a recurring romanticism about the past? Or perhaps the myth of a golden history is necessary to organizations like the BBC, where, unlike many industries, people ought not to be consensus-minded. Being difficult (up to a point) may indeed be a very important part of good journalism.

Indeed, an organization like the BBC that has endured, and developed, always at the very edge of rapidly evolving technology, has a peculiar relationship with its own past. It is made all the more strange by the way in which it can *use* its past. Old programmes are continually reshown, readapted. The ‘past’ of the BBC is more visible than that of most firms, and the BBC’s involvement in its audience’s past is also complex. People remember events and themselves through what they saw or heard broadcast. Elaborating conservative tradition has been one way of handling dramatic technological change. Indeed, the fatigued sense that there has recently been too much change which seems to characterize people working for the BBC, is a product not only of change – which the Corporation has always had to do – but of having to produce rationales as well as action.

The BBC shares this sense of ‘too much change’ with several other institutions. Indeed, those working in the Health Service, for example, just like those in the BBC naturally have to deal with constant change because treatment is altering all the time. On the other hand, the



core activity of other institutions, like education, that also complain of ‘too much change’ remain remarkably constant over time. But perhaps what all these services share is that they provide goods which cannot easily, and perhaps ought not to, be assessed by profitability. ‘Good’ broadcasting, and ‘good’ education are not easy to measure – though we may feel quite secure about identifying them when we see them.

Nevertheless, the past’s superiority is a recurring theme in the BBC’s self-perception. When the Corporation moved out of its original, cramped offices on Savoy Hill in 1926, one broadcaster asserted that the old offices ‘had been quite the most pleasant club in London’; before, he went on, ‘all was intimacy and harmony. After, all was bureaucracy and conflict.’ During the Second World War, one broadcasting official recalled ‘the old, intimate, close days of pre-war broadcasting’; after it, others repined ‘the urgent, close sense of purpose the war produced in the BBC’. Grace Wyndham Goldie, a doyenne of a whole generation of broadcasters and a stern innovator in political broadcasting, nevertheless said that ‘the smaller BBC of the early 1950s meant that ideas flowed more freely’. Tom Burns pointed out that by the mid-1970s everyone he talked to in the BBC complained that it had recently become ‘too big’, yet in fact the Corporation had grown far less quickly than in the previous decade. By the 1990s, BBC employees were still saying that it was far too big, even though it had recently got much smaller. But above all they said that, in the past, working for the BBC had felt like a vocation; people were sometimes infuriated by it, but also proud of it as an idea and as a standard. Argument, they also claimed, had been allowed, encouraged, and was not stoppable.

In the early 1990s, some distinguished voices expressed deep anxiety about the kind of place the Corporation was becoming. They were all the more impressive because none of them were under any threat: they mattered too much. Indeed, in different ways, they summed up, in the programmes they had made, the independence of their views, the accumulated concessions and stands they had taken and, in a creative authority, why public service broadcasting had been an important and exciting part of public and private life. David Attenborough, a great programme maker, and in his time a very distinguished BBC administrator, and Mark Tully, a legend in India on which he had reported for years, argued that the BBC had become a hostile, demoralized, over-managed and secretive place. The dramatist, Dennis Potter, in a scathing attack on Rupert Murdoch and the BBC at the Edinburgh Television Festival, lamented the retreat of all television from innovative programme making. There was, in the early 1990s, a sense of a crisis of confidence within the organization. What was the BBC for, if not for programme makers of this ingenuity and integrity to make programmes that entertain, educate and inform?

Of course, the BBC culture is wordy, sarcastic, urbane, discontented, sometimes fashionable – and perhaps, properly, always likely to be disgruntled. Sniping, gossiping, and

gripping are part of the atmosphere. Yet, in this period, the BBC, like many other managerialized institutions, became a feverishly political place, with the political pressure from outside transmuted into intense internal pressure. Perhaps again because, ultimately, the BBC makes ideas, trades in images, the impact of managers and their ‘correct’ and ‘incorrect’ ideas is felt more personally. ‘I don’t mind being told what to do by some chap in a suit who’s never edited a programme’, complained one BBC producer, ‘but I’m buggered if I’m going to be told what to think.’<sup>15</sup>

## Leaders

Part of the new managerialism of the 1980s was an importing of a kind of posturing ruthlessness. Everywhere, passengers, patients, and those out on parole were renamed ‘clients’ in the public services. If Hussey was sent into the BBC by the Conservative government to bring it into line, John Birt was widely seen as his agent in the new tough mode.

Birt had been a very successful and innovative programme maker in the smaller but hugely fertile LWT. Trained as a scientist, one observer claimed that he thought in structures, and then tried to make the organization fit the ideas. He was, commented another, ‘a facts and figures man’. Asked to speak about quality drama, he wanted evidence about numbers of plays shown, hours broadcast, percentages of viewers. Those who worked with him also commented that he was ‘a rules man – his plan was always to decide on a “rule” and keep to it’. Privately energetic and charming, in public meetings, although always well prepared, he could, in the early days, be wooden, an odd mixture of shyness and bombast. He became more relaxed and confident as his tenure moved on. Yet arguably, the two previous, indisputably great Director Generals – John Reith and Hugh Greene in the 1960s – had both also often been accused of being overbearing and dictatorial. Greene was also a mischievous person. Both men combined aggressive style with a widely recognized – if not always approved of – image of what the BBC should do. Birt began his career at the BBC in the most difficult times the Corporation had ever experienced, so vision may have seemed a luxury. Certainly, in the early 1990s, there was a mounting abrasive press reaction – but this was merely an aspect of press hostility to the Corporation. At first, some sensed that he didn’t particularly like the BBC. Roger Bolton, a former BBC producer and respected programme maker, wrote in the *Guardian*: ‘The BBC has a deep and abiding hold on those who have worked for the Corporation’; he went on, ‘the overwhelming impression given by those who now run the BBC is that they have no affection for it and for its past achievements, and no respect for its programme makers.’ But then some saw Bolton as a critic, in turn, with an axe to grind.

Simmering internal resentment, combined with a hawkish press, meant that Birt’s every action was under media scrutiny. It didn’t help that the twelfth Director General of the BBC

got his job almost by fiat, and that able, respected competitors, like John Tusa, who had recently successfully reformed the prestigious World Service (and carried an enthusiastic staff with him), were told by Hussey that there was no point in applying. How he was appointed was not Birt's fault, but it made him look like the product of the kowtowing politics of the 1980s. What became known as 'Armani-Gate' also did damage. The title came from the Director General's preference for stylish designer suits. However, it shocked BBC employees (many of whom were now on short-term contracts and had recently been sternly warned by the rectitudinous Corporation that they must pay their taxes properly) when they discovered that the Director General himself apparently did not actually work for the Corporation. Instead, he was paid his salary through a holding company which permitted him to make a small – and indeed in the rest of broadcasting, routine – tax advantage. At the time it was as if a great British institution had been so undermined by the Conservative onslaught that those who were supposed to hold its future dearest were not committed to it.

Birt was saved, largely because influential and objective commentators rallied to support him. Particularly important was a letter sent by senior journalists to the *Independent*, publicly backing him. 'Old axes are grinding' Polly Toynbee, Peter Jay, and others wrote, and 'old scores are being settled in the attack on the Director General'. He was certainly helped by distinguished and, on the whole, left-wing members of the general committee. It was a delicate moment; Michael Checkland, the previous Director General, reduced a meeting to roars of appreciative laughter when he began a speech by quoting his BBC employee number. The problem was not whether Birt was or was not venal, but what people thought it meant for the BBC. Indeed, the incident may have been a turning point in showing that the public still cared quite passionately about the Corporation.

In the early 1990s things were at first made worse by a decline in audience ratings (Cotton was undoubtedly right – the government would be more hesitant in interfering with a Corporation whose programmes were on everyone's tongues, that people eagerly watched). There was anxiety that decisions were becoming too cautious; a particularly wounding example was that which prohibited Peter Jay, appointed precisely to give weight to BBC economic coverage, from broadcasting a damning overview of the government's economic performance during the 1992 election. Indeed, in the early 1990s the Corporation was still not investing in a future with the possibility of a different political regime. But then perhaps no British institution was. Mrs Thatcher went – and in broadcasting there was a moment of ideological respite. But the BBC did not seem keen – or judge it safe – to move the policy agenda.

As the 1990s progressed the BBC calmed down. Perhaps this was because all the opposing voices had been shunted off, retired, or were too busy. Perhaps it was because political pressure from government and opposition had changed from volatile hysteria to a steady

pressure of objections, attempts to arrange favourable news running order, lunches, and telephone calls. Or perhaps it was because the BBC had been reformed and was more in control of its own agenda of change than in the volatile 1980s.

There was also a shift of power within the Corporation; Birt was even prepared to humiliate Hussey – soon to retire anyway. The Chairman, married to a Lady-in-Waiting to the Queen, was given no prior warning and was hugely embarrassed that the BBC had conducted a secret, and constitutionally damaging, deal with the Princess of Wales for a revenge interview to put her case against Prince Charles. It was seen by the BBC as a scoop – and it netted the Corporation a huge world audience. Whether it was proper, or properly conducted or not, seemed to matter little. Certainly Hussey was ruthlessly sidelined as his influence waned.

The BBC had apparently become a very British institution by the 1990s, rather bureaucratic (it reputedly took sixteen different processes to get a bill paid, and clerks were supplied with flow charts of procedures), but then it always had been. Yet it was undoubtedly more disciplined. Most important of all it was producing some outstanding programmes. Nevertheless, with another ‘reorganization’ it looked as if it were about to damage the World Service – the jewel in the BBC’s crown. However, above all, under John Birt, the BBC had, against all the odds, survived.

### **Who saved the BBC?**

How was Mrs Thatcher thwarted? Part of the answer was just politics. There was an important element in her Cabinet who were determined to protect the BBC. Of these William Whitelaw was undoubtedly the most influential: no one could have been closer to her, making his determined opposition all the more effective. Whitelaw pointed out that when the Conservatives were in opposition in 1965 the BBC’s Director General had been very determined to protect Conservative opposition interests against the then Labour Government. It was a debt that was amply repaid. Whitelaw saw it as important evidence of the benefits of independent, impartial public service broadcasting.

‘In a difficult field’, he was to write, ‘we should be most careful not to endanger what we have achieved.’ Early on in government Whitelaw oversaw the implementation of a Labour plan, and introduced Channel 4. He remained a resourceful Cabinet player. Whitelaw had said, ‘It’s committee work and behind the door work, and respect that gets you what you want’ and, almost in direct contradiction to his leader, concluded that ‘I am always disturbed by talk of achieving higher standards in programmes at the same time as proposals are introduced leading to deregulation, and financial competition because I do not believe that they are basically compatible.’<sup>16</sup> Whitelaw knew what he didn’t want, and traded his indispensability

to the Prime Minister for it. After the early, lunatic faith that the Prime Minister held, that a technological transformation of Britain could be carried out on the backs of people's appetites for old movies, and after Rupert Murdoch had got everything he could wish for in terms of favourable policies for his new satellite station, Mrs Thatcher's attention also turned elsewhere.

The second factor was that, despite growing competition, people still liked watching BBC programmes. Popularity – and a sense that programmes reflect and shape viewers' and listeners' interests, that there are some programmes at the edge of public opinion and pleasure – proves the most solid defence for broadcasters. Yet in the beginning, programmes seemed very removed from the heart of the new regime – and the fertile argument, and sense of ideas flowing that encourage creativity, seemed so alien to the new, neatly managed structure – that there was a fear that the Corporation had been saved, but that quality broadcasting had not. There were continuous and growing anxieties about radio, which worsened with the departure of one of Birt's most respected appointees – Liz Forgan, from the post of Head of Radio. She had left because the next stage in rationalization was to be the creation of 'bi-medial departments', serving both radio and television. It was feared that the specialized culture of, for example, children's television, or the alternative news agenda of the World Service, would be lost. However, at least by the mid-1990s, the argument was again about programmes.

One effect of the Broadcasting Act had been to create new opportunities for all the people who could not bear the old broadcasting sector any more – in the independent sector. Indeed, for at least one generation public service broadcasting values (that you made programmes because they were important and interesting and necessary) survived in the best of the independent companies. So the BBC exported values – and for a while could import back programmes made by its own kind of broadcaster.

The third factor was that the reforms cut costs at the BBC. However, huge sums were wasted on the way. Early on, the producer's choice system was discovered to be paying some costs twice, and money was 'lost' in the system (malcontents grumbled that at least under the old scheme transferred funds were spent on programmes not 'lost'). Money was also mishandled in setting up BBC Enterprises. This was a typical 1990s venture. The idea was that it earned the BBC 'extra' revenue by exploiting BBC programmes. It cost more than it ever brought in. Nevertheless, however ramshackle the process, a leaner, more cost-conscious BBC emerged. But this alone would not have been sufficient to save the Corporation.

Perhaps Birt was more in debt to all the dissidents than he realized. So vociferous was the campaign, as successive waves of reorganization cut swathes through what journalists saw as central BBC ways of doing things, it certainly seemed that the process was very painful. Loud

complaints may, ironically, have served to placate the government that the BBC was being reformed as it would wish.

Birt, and his team, managed to steer the Corporation through the greatest ever challenge to its existence. By the mid-1990s the BBC felt as if it were, slightly grimly, on a course it understood. It is a story which may show how flexible British establishment institutions can be. The BBC remained a national and international institution; it had not, in the end, been fatally politically compromised. It made good programmes. The public also actually cared about it. It was Birt's particular capacity, in a way, to look forward, and the Corporation began to prepare for how it might give a 'public service' interpretation to the opportunities of digital television. This was an immensely interesting problem but required resources, and resources were not what the BBC was likely to have. The BBC, as even top managers admitted, also felt weary. Despite the fact that innovative programming and innovative services – giving the public what they do not yet know they will enjoy – are widely seen as the most important commercial and cultural opportunity ahead, one that the BBC is uniquely capable of meeting, Corporation revenues were set to fall while they watched commercial competitors earn huge profits. The problem would be to change, maintain a distinctive profile, and innovate.

Public service can perhaps only be measured by what it is institutions agonize over. If you are only there to make a profit, everything is far simpler. Questions like: What do children need? How ought the public to be informed about the election? What new dramatists should be developed? How do we reflect the debate about contemporary society? and many others, are simply not relevant in a commercial system. Perhaps the answer would be in how the BBC, less well placed than it might have been, but an important player still, could deal with the opportunities it faced. Perhaps the answer is also that we may have to choose to cherish institutions which matter.<sup>17</sup>

## Notes

- 1 Margaret Thatcher, *The Downing Street Years* (London, HarperCollins, 1995), p. 210.
- 2 Hugo Young, *One of Us* (London, Cape, 1992), p. 510.
- 3 Mrs Thatcher, speech to the Parliamentary Press Gallery, 11 July 1981.
- 4 Institute of Contemporary British History, 'Witness Seminar', *Real Lives* (February 1995).
- 5 *The Nolan Report on Standards in Public Life*, Cmnd. 2850, 1995, 1. para 70.
- 6 Alisdair Milne, *Director General: The Memoirs of a British Broadcaster* (London, Hodder & Stoughton, 1988), p. 74.
- 7 Steve Barnett and Andrew Curry, *The Battle for the BBC: A British Broadcasting Conspiracy* (London, The Aurum Press, 1994); Chris Home and S. Clarke, *Fuzzy Monsters: Fear and Loathing at the BBC* (London, Heinemann, 1994).

- 8 Interview with Chris Beaman.
- 9 Tom Burns, *The BBC: Public Institution and Private World*, Basingstoke, Macmillan, (1977), p. 43.
- 10 Author interview.
- 11 C. Handy, 'Balancing corporate power: a new Federalist paper', *Harvard Business Review*, 1992, p. 572.
- 12 Author interview.
- 13 J. Harvey-Jones, *Making it Happen* (London, HarperCollins, 1991).
- 14 Author interview.
- 15 Quoted in Steve Barnett and Andrew Curry (op. cit.), p. 219.
- 16 William Whitelaw, *The Whitelaw Memoirs* (London, The Aurum Press, 1989), p. 285.
- 17 This chapter is based on a number of confidential interviews with policy makers, broadcasters, and politicians.

## **Part III**

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### *Theories of the media*

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*Global futures, the information society,  
and broadcasting*

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When we talk about the future, we may reveal more about how we understand the present than make reliable predictions about what will happen. Thinking about the future can be enabling, offering us images and hopes worth working for, warnings worth heeding, or it can be disabling, obscuring what needs to be understood and tackled, urgently, now. J. G. Ballard, the great science fiction writer, much of whose work is catastrophically dystopic, and whose vision perhaps always stems from his own experience as a child in a Japanese prisoner-of-war camp, has written that now ‘to some extent the future has been enclosed in the present, for most of us the notion of the future as an alternative scheme, as an alternative world to which we are moving no longer exists’.

Yet, recently, a series of words and ideas describing a new world order, a new economic regime, new politics, new social and community patterns, and even new psyches for a new industrial revolution (and of course a new millennium) have been gathering force. Just as the collapse of Marxism and Keynesianism in the late 1980s was heralded as the end of grand and overarching theories, paradoxically, another apparently indisputable iron law has emerged. The world, it seems, and everything in it has begun to be, and will be inexorably, ‘globalized’. At the heart of this global revolution are a series of dramatic innovations, every one of which is dependent on developments in the media of communications. Sometimes, as agents of communication, they ‘globalize’ the world, sometimes as subjects they are ‘globalized’ But they are key – and like King Midas miraculously transform all they touch, if not exactly into gold, at least into something utterly new. Apparently we can see the future – and it is interactive and global.

Of course, like all successful ideas, globalization may have become so ubiquitous because it is right. On the other hand, it may have spread because it is particularly useful to some of those interest groups who trade in ideas. Certainly the term is very flexible, and it describes some things which are all too evidently changing. Nevertheless, for those on the political

right, the rhetoric of globalization came in the nick of time. Just as the social and economic costs of the dominant liberal deregulatory, individualized, free market politics and policies of the 1970s and 1980s began to be counted, globalization emerged. A new term to describe an inevitable transformation, its most committed advocates agreed that the theory of globalization suggested that governments were in any case impotent, and that global economics and markets were beyond discipline. Globalization provided a new lease of life for a political project that might otherwise have begun to falter, and gave it a new, high-tech, modern appeal.

Simultaneously, the political left and self-consciously progressive social critics embraced globalization, first in a spirit of gloom as yet another capitalist conspiracy, and second, and more hopefully, as a new dawn – the revolution. It was convenient because despite the convulsions in the real world, the arch enemy remained comfortably familiar – a new, beefed-up version of the multinational corporation. Indeed, globalization theory had the additional attraction of demonstrating the illusory nature of conventional ameliorative politics and policies. Traditional democratic and representative politics were apparently dinosaurs, doomed to extinction in the face of new conditions. Moreover, something unimaginably different (and consequently unarguable) would develop, after the global information revolution had changed everything. Interactive and direct democracy would emerge and consumers with necessarily technologically enhanced powers would be made more citizen-like.

Thus perhaps globalization became such a taken-for-granted idea because it perfectly captured and articulated conventional – and even comfortable – thoughts for such a wide variety of interests. Everywhere, from exotic foreign social theorists to domestic Anglo-Saxon professors, from politicians to television and telecommunications executives, it was agreed, wrote Anthony Giddens, that ‘through the new technologies of computer and satellite, through the new media a new world will be made’.<sup>1</sup> Bright young gurus could argue, ‘We are now on the edge of another epochal shift towards human capital: the resources that communication will make matter are skill, ingenuity and creativity.’<sup>2</sup> While commentators on communication, like Anthony Smith – always endearingly neophilic – could claim ‘If computers alter the nature of our groups, and our information, then most certainly the industries of the electronic media must be altering the pattern of society in general.’ If you liked its consequences it resembled good old-fashioned progress. If you didn’t – or had doubts – it was part of the same old conspiracy. But either way, there was not apparently all that much that could be done about it.

Indeed, the future of the convergence of communication technologies is often described in comfortingly familiar ways. It apparently offers interactive communication (like talking), information (like books), uncensorable, unlimited access of everyone to everything (like libraries, but better). In addition, it is said to offer interactive ‘responsible’ democracy, at a time when the rewards of being a citizen are increasingly restricted and there is the emergence

of an excluded underclass, particularly so in the very wealthiest societies. Finally, it offers 'new ways of working' (when it is all too clear that 'old' ways of working – jobs – are in decline). These familiar virtuous capacities are to be linked and extended to make a new world; no one is in any doubt that this will be a new – global – order.

There is, of course, much evidence for extraordinary shifts in communication and huge increases in communicative patterns. Yet much of the abundant writing on globalization seems to assert general consequences on the basis of speculation rather than evidence. The distinguished French historian Robert Darnton, in an essay called 'The great cat massacre', which explains the sociological pressures which made the fourteenth-century Parisian printers find such pleasure in killing their masters' cats, argued that when we encounter a feeling, or an argument that is incomprehensible, 'When we cannot get a proverb, or a joke, or a ritual, or a poem – we know as historians we are on to something.'<sup>3</sup> Historical work is best started from how they, then, were different from us, and why. But perhaps in looking at contemporary thought our duty is related to Darnton's idea – but is an inversion of it. When everyone is so unanimous about a term and a process, then we need to stop and ask what it means (when everybody seems to know), what work it is doing, and for whom.

## Technology

At the heart of the debate about globalization is an argument, hidden in a description, informed by a Utopian projection. They are all ways of coming to terms with, and mastering, a series of undoubtedly dazzling new technological opportunities that may alter our very ideas about wants, needs, choice and social arrangements. What needs caution is the way in which unfounded projections into future patterns are then used to determine decisions and policy now.

In the past, broadcasting was a distinct technology – and the political and economic patterns of how it was distributed were greatly influenced by the scarcity of air waves to send it through. Telephones were another, separate technology and form of communication, governed by quite independent organizations and ways of thought. Finally, the storing and ordering of information, which had admittedly steadily increased in capacity over the century (and both the very best and the very worst action of states, in what Eric Hobsbawm has called *The Age of Extremes*, depended on the huge growth of this power), happened in different places using different technologies. The capacity to use information was influenced by other technologies (the telephone, the typewriter, the carbon copy, the photocopier), but information was manipulated in different places for different purposes from broadcasting or telephones.

These technologies have now converged. Limitless amounts of information can be gathered, grouped, carried, used, in new ways. Television and videos can come down the

telephone lines, and cable and satellite offer breathtakingly increased capacity to carry communication. The evolution of the microchip at the centre of the revolution is so fast that it doubles in capacity every five years. At the heart of nearly all of these technological innovations – and indeed in the most abstract developments of the mathematical reasoning that underpins them – is the capacity to reduce complexity. This means that more and more information can be compressed and carried more quickly, more efficiently and more cheaply. With so much information capacity, individual consumers will be able to interact with any of the services they are offered, adjusting what they receive to what they want. We have hardly begun to understand how the telephone has changed our social habits, but interactive machines may change us more. Digital television, for example – the next big challenge for public service broadcasting – could offer not just a plethora of new channels, but also enhanced opportunities for people to explore what interests them.

Beyond these services there is the Wild West of the Internet. At the moment this is slow, and has exploding quantities of useless and trivial things cluttering it up. Yet its potential to provide a huge resource for learning and communication, and for developing novel kinds of understanding, is perhaps vast. In addition, there are the extraordinary combinations of these technologies that, for example, allow an expert consultant in a hospital to examine in detail the condition of a patient anywhere else. A combination of telecommunications, television and computers can produce a world of ‘virtual reality’ reproducing, ever more closely, either synthetic experience (as in games), or real experience (as in the medical example above). These developments have been a consequence of the spread of computers – of ever increasing power and ever decreasing cost – into homes and to every aspect of commerce and public life. The changes will be the result of exponential increase in the capacities of computing.

Such developments shrink distance and time. They are accompanied by a highly individualized image of knowledge. In this the emphasis is always on individuals ‘creating’, exploring, putting together what they need or want from the hugely increased choice and access provided by the new communication technologies. Together these changes have been said to herald the end of institutions as we have known them.

Nevertheless, these Utopian scenarios (faintly reminiscent of the land of milk and honey where there is never scarcity) fail to account for, and indeed regard as an unimportant enquiry, how the question will be framed to put to the new services. People’s wants, needs, questions and enquiries, their capacity to creatively interact will still be formed and made by their own education – or lack of it – and by the purposes they bring to addressing the system.

Second, there is the problem of who will provide what services, based on what principles. Indeed, we are seeing a whole new technology of communication emerging, perhaps for the very first time, determined by one principle, profit. But profit-driven services will have a pattern, just as clearly as any other. Indeed, one firm, Microsoft, owned by Bill Gates, already ‘owns’ the computer language that dominates worldwide computer use, and is seeking to gain monopoly control over access to the Internet. ‘Choice’ is thus already a chimera.

Many of the theories addressing the communication basis of globalization see technology as an uncontrollable natural force, a typhoon, relinking and remaking the world in new ways. In part they seek to explain what the communication revolution has done. Yet this approach sees other political, social and psychological arrangements as products of communication – but as having little consequence themselves. Technology in this account is the only free spirit abroad. It apparently produces globalization.

### **Evolutionists, pessimists and revolutionaries**

Globalization is nevertheless hotly contested. Some say it is a good thing, others that it is damaging. However various the explanations of its effects, and despite their opposition to each other, the different proponents share more than they admit. They all seem to believe that nothing much can modify or change how it develops, they merely argue about the interpretations of consequences whose pattern they seem to assume is already determined by technology.

The first group, the evolutionists, claim that a new epoch has emerged, driven not by class antagonism, or the requirements of capitalism, but rather by information technologies. This is certainly not a new idea, and it was most clearly elaborated in the 1960s by Daniel Bell. Bell's quite elderly, though somewhat revamped, ideas have become fashionable again. Bell first suggested in 1963 that a new 'post-industrial' economy and society was developing. Making things – in factories – would become less important than knowing about how things were being made elsewhere. The service sector would supersede that of production, and 'workers' would be replaced by 'professionals' – the expert servants of knowledge. Just as machines had rationalized production, so the new technologies would rationalize the manipulation of information. Thus, for example, farming would become the calculable end product of greater knowledge and surveillance of the weather, grain genetics, soil monitoring, and so on.

Bell's vision was not only prescient, but also curiously cosy. This new age was going to emerge, apparently without nasty cataclysms, and indeed the world it would usher in was distinctly more pleasant than the one it replaced. It offered less hard, dirty work, more cleaner, more interesting work and a more rational political and economic system. It offered an attractive prospect for the future, particularly to middle-class professionals who were apparently nice and steadily, and probably meritocratically, going to inherit the new epoch. It proposed an image of middle America, mildly and knowledgeably skilling the world. It suggested that knowledge, expertise, information and rational calculation would reign more powerfully. Indeed, as Krishnan Kumar has pointed out, 'the Utopian tide of the 1960s flowed largely within a tide of technological optimism. The argument was not against technology, but against its abuse.'<sup>4</sup>

Perhaps not entirely surprisingly, entrepreneurs like Bill Gates, the pioneer of home computers, and by 1996 America's most wealthy businessman, talks, at least for public consumption, in firmly evolutionary tones. He argues that 'a fully developed information revolution will be affordable – almost by definition. An expensive system that connected a few big corporations and wealthy people simply would not be an information highway – it would be a private world. . . . The information revolution is a mass phenomenon or it is nothing.' The emergent social organization brought about by the information revolution will have inherently stable, socially desirable outcomes. 'We are all created equal in the virtual world', Gates says. The information network will not eliminate barriers of prejudice or inequality but it will be a powerful force in that direction.<sup>5</sup> The information revolution, according to this view, gently rationalizes and develops – it improves things.

In contrast there are pessimists, like Herbert Schiller, who argue that the communication revolution will merely reinforce existing inequalities in a world which is becoming perilously more divided. Such views emphasize the continuities that will determine the new technologies. They see the undoubted potential of the information revolution merely being squeezed through the economic and social relation of the 'old' power system – providing nothing more than new opportunities for old exploitation. Information poverty is just an additional and final burden to those already deprived in every other way.

Indeed, according to this view, the varied tastes, habits, cultures of the world are threatened, like the world's animal species, with extinction, by dominating, profit-driven, Western culture. Thus, writes Schiller, Brazilian television, for example, 'is no more than the creolisation of U.S. Cultural products. It is the spiced up third world copy of western values, norms, and patterns of behavior.'<sup>6</sup>

There have also been even more flamboyant theorists like Foucault, who identified surveillance and control, the arbitrary, but ever present, possibility of regulation, correction and domination as the intrinsic and essential feature of modern societies. The information revolution was the crowning extension of this. Following him, writers like Lyotard not only suggested that 'information' was central to all contemporary institutions, but that everywhere beliefs in redemptive, 'meta-narratives' in the power of religion, science or democracy had collapsed, only to be replaced by an ever growing reliance on the computer's powers of ordering.

Finally, there are the revolutionaries. They are united in believing that something dramatically, recognizably novel must be occurring, or will soon occur, and they suggest that every conceivable aspect of life will be changed. Anthony Giddens, an early advocate of 'globalization', wrote, 'as different areas of the globe are drawn into interconnection with one another, waves of social transformation crash across virtually the whole earth's surface . . . the new modes of life will sweep us from all traditional types of social order in a quite unprecedented fashion.' What is now happening is 'a ruthless break with any and all preceding conditions'. The stable identities of cultures, economies, firms, work, needs and

indeed personalities, are to be re-forged by globalization, claims Brian Harvey, another theorist who claims much for global organization.

Within this the media and communication have a complicated role. They are seen as the most prominent example of the global economy. It is argued that as media products cost more to produce, as audiences expect ever higher production values, so are needed ever bigger markets to recoup their costs. Thus the same films and television programmes are to be seen worldwide. Moreover, the giant media conglomerates – always seeking attention unlike many international companies who prefer anonymity – are all too evidently prominent buyers and sellers of local media in many nations. Their empires, if not their owners, attract and court publicity. Further, media values are seen as the shock troops of global cultural revolution. Its generals are the giant companies whose logos bestride the world.

### **Global business giants**

However, left-wing critics have been concerned about ‘multi-national’ corporations for many years. These powerful enterprises trading across the world were originally seen as the economic inheritors of political imperialism. From their home bases in the First World – America, Europe, Japan – they brought natural products from, and sold goods to, and indeed remodelled the economies of, the ‘underdeveloped’ world. Thus a Third World country would find itself giving up self-sufficient food production in order to produce a cash crop for export, only to find itself, as the 1980s and 1990s vividly showed, tragically over-dependent on the price the ‘world’ was prepared to pay for its coffee or sugar. The multi-national corporations according to these theories only saw the developing world in terms of potential markets, and the developing world’s industries were swamped and annihilated by superior, cheaper products, sold to them from far away.

The role of the media was seen by many commentators to be critical to the process. However, in terms of the media industries themselves, the term ‘multi-national’ was something of a misnomer. Only America had a truly international market for its media goods, the essential form and style of some of which, for example, film, had originated in the United States. This had an apparently overwhelmingly dominating place in media markets all over the world for many years.

In the case of the media, the argument was that they were exporting Western wants along with the programmes. In this way, it was thought that the media made people in poor countries want the things they saw. Sometimes what they saw and wanted were goods; sometimes, it was argued, what they saw and wanted were rights and freedoms.

This process had for a while been seen as having a potentially useful side. The media, it was believed, might work like Maynard Keynes’ famous economic multiplier by magnifying



and spreading ideas faster. It had been suggested in the early 1960s that the impediment which stood in the way of underdeveloped nations economies' progress was the inappropriate attitudes and habits of their peoples. The media, it was hoped, could help change those fast. It proved to be a far more difficult and fraught process than had been expected.

A more cautious interpretation was that the Western media relentlessly bore values that advocated consumption. The media were the 'hidden' persuaders, whose images kept the whole developing, post-imperial world in thrall to the big corporations of the developed world – and through them at the mercy of the political whim of the imperial powers.

However, in the late 1980s, critics began to identify a new, bigger, badder, more authoritarian brother to the multi-national corporation: the transnational corporation. These even more huge businesses, made possible by exploitation of the new technologies of communication, were no longer the tools of any imperial political design other than their own. Enterprises based on 'home' nation states – and trading with its interests in mind – were said everywhere to be being replaced by autonomous, free-standing companies, as indifferent to the interests of the First as to those of the Third World. The transnational corporation, ruthless, uncontrollable, unfettered by responsibility or even habits, was world-dominating. Nation states no longer controlled them, but rather pathetically vied with each other to attract such companies' investments.

Using cheap, instantaneous, interactive communications, these corporations compose a production process out of a global base. Choosing cheap labour in one place, low taxes in another, good services elsewhere, these transnational corporations, it is argued, have broken free from the complex political ties and obligations of operating from one nation; of being national. Then, using the global media to sell their goods everywhere, they create new cultures. Such corporations owe allegiance only to profit. At the worst they become the only agents in the world capable of pursuing policy (even if that is profit), at the best they offer the promise of a new intra-corporate global world – which, somehow, may be better.

Indeed, the position of the media – which, unlike other commodities that also help shape politics, are peculiarly vulnerable – may make them become little more than pawns bought or sold to give companies a voice in national affairs. In fact, the great media empires, like Disney, provided the model for the theory of transnational corporations. The internationalization of the images of the products of these corporations displayed through the media provided powerful evidence of the nature of global markets – and, of course, stimulated their growth. Thus it is suggested that these corporations depended on the cheap, fast, interactive communications of complex data anywhere and that the information manipulation and processing capacities of the information revolutions produced a new industrial form. The imagery generated by the media produced new global markets and together they introduced a new epoch – the globalized world. The key characteristic of this world is that space and time

are made irrelevant by communications. The strong theorists of globalization have thus produced a powerful reinterpretation of contemporary industrial developments.<sup>7</sup>

Yet, however recognizable this description is, there are some problems with it, not least that the world's markets have actually been globalized, in the sense of being open with growing international trade flows, for a very long time. Jevons, the great nineteenth-century economist, wrote in 1834 that 'the plains of North America and Russia are our cornfields, and the groves of Canada and the Baltic our timber groves. Peru sends us her silver, our coffee and sugar and spices come from India, and the Chinese grow tea for us.' Indeed, the most important shrinking of the world occurred perhaps in the 1860s when Reuters laid cables which immediately took news of ships, and markets, politics and rebellions, all over the world. In fact, the international economy has a complex history of relative openness and closure, but it is clear that the world has been shrunk for many years.

Furthermore, although the models of the transnational corporations are just what you would expect, in theory, to emerge from a globalized world, the actual evidence about their growth is more complex. Although nearly all modern businesses operate internationally, only very few are like the model of the transnational corporation. Most firms, and most compelling of all, most of the really successful firms that operate in multi-national situations, do so from an identifiable home national base. John Dunning, in a monumental study of multi-national corporations, concluded that throughout the world 'home' country sales still dominate multi-national corporation sales.<sup>8</sup> Even in industries where sales abroad were of overall importance, the basis of profit was clearly in one 'home market' first. In addition, some 'home' markets and indeed those that are seen as peculiarly advanced, for example, the Japanese and the German, remain remarkably closed to goods and services from other places.

Moreover, the companies which count as 'multi-national', as Hirst and Thompson point out, vary greatly in the kind and pattern of dependence they have on overseas sales. Some rely on a home market, some on a regional market, some on more diverse markets. For example, German firms (for strong historical reasons) are particularly heavily represented in South Africa. 'International businesses', Hirst and Thompson argue, 'are still largely confined to their home territories'; they remain heavily 'nationally embedded'.<sup>9</sup>

Moreover, investments, profits, exports, have different profiles in different nations. In many, regional markets are more important than global ones. There are transnational corporations, but not all firms are evolving towards being like them. Transnational firms are also changing, indeed, the world over; as *The Economist* pointed out, the most successful firms are getting smaller, not larger.

Moreover, world trade has not simply become more 'global' as the century has progressed – as the globalization orthodoxy implies. World trade was more open, more countries traded more of what they produced with other countries in 1914 than in 1995. France and Japan still,

in 1997, export a smaller proportion of the goods they produce than they did before the First World War. Hirst and Thompson make a powerful case for at least looking at the evidence about what is happening to world trade, rather than, as they suggest the orthodox globalization theorists do, cavalierly marshalling complex data to support an over-simple, predetermined theory. The twentieth century has thus not seen a simple movement (impeded by a war or two) from closed national markets to open global ones.

One of the things that globalized media markets are supposed to be doing is producing a homogenized international global culture. ‘Coca-Cola, Disney and McDonalds, from Moscow to New York, from Tienamen Square to Papua, it is the same culture that is present everywhere: and thus it will be’, claims the strong globalizer, Rosenau. Most prominent, indeed most puzzling perhaps, is the spectacle of American-produced soap operas screened all over the world, or of British comedies watched and laughed at in places where their meanings can hardly be expected to resonate – for example, *Mr Bean* in Bosnia. This is such a strange development that it is often cited as definitive evidence of globalization’s inevitable pattern. Orthodox globalization theorists cite it as demonstrating the existence of an already homogenized world ‘taste’. Everybody, everywhere, likes the same things. The issue is further confused by the emphasis on viewers’ choice. The public everywhere, they argue, must now be the same, for they choose the same programme to watch. Yet, in the case of television, what viewers choose between is what programme buyers have selected. It is not viewers but programme purchasers who dictate what is seen.

Indeed, buying cheap, imported programming, which is what American programmes are everywhere other than America, is not a sign of advanced, pioneer, ‘global’ tastes. On the contrary, it is evidence of impoverished media markets. Poor countries, poor entertainment systems, buy in relatively cheap (because not domestically produced) foreign programming. The more wealth an entertainment system has, the more it shows programmes made specifically for its own audiences. Indeed, there is evidence that many more sophisticated and wealthy entertainment markets (in contrast to the theoretical projections of globalization) are all beginning to show more ‘upmarket’ and more domestically produced programming. Showing ‘world’ culture may therefore be a transitional moment – not the highest or most developed point in entertainment markets.

Indeed, if we examine the attempts of the giant media corporations to globalize culture, it is evident that this is not as simple a process as the theorists argue. Attempts by Murdoch to run Asian satellite television stations failed. They did not do so because Murdoch’s News International was obstinate about adhering to Western cultural values – like objectivity, or impartiality; indeed, such expensive principles were quickly dispensed with if necessary. The satellite service to China, for example, was more than prepared to supply reporting

conventionally doctored by the government. The station failed because audiences did not like the programmes it showed. 'Global' culture does not always sell well.

Thus, although world trade and the trade in media goods and communications have changed and there are profound problems involved with any simple assertion about culture internationally, the contemporary patterns of media markets are not, on closer examination, those so blithely agreed on by the more extreme global theorists. More tellingly, they are not likely to remain the same. Markets, the orthodox globalizers seem to have failed to notice, go on changing.

### **Nations, nationality and globalization**

One of the things 'globalization' is widely agreed to have done, or to be doing, or soon will have done, is to kill off the nation state. As Daniel Bell argued, the territorial nation state was 'too small for the big problems of life, and too big for the small problems of life'.<sup>10</sup> Internationally, globalization is said to make the nation state increasingly irrelevant. John Gray, the right-wing political theorist, has, in this vein, recently argued that social democracy is similarly doomed.<sup>11</sup> There are many aspects of economic management that the nation has lost the power to control – financial speculation is now so swift and so huge that it could bring about the collapse of any economy. In addition, a state's internal policies increasingly can do little to modify international pressures. Paul Kennedy described the problem well: 'If a government is conscientiously attempting to provide better schools, better health care, housing and public utilities for its citizens, by what means can it raise the necessary funds without alarming investors who may be not at all interested in the well being of those citizens, but merely in their own profits?'<sup>12</sup> He indicates that even a well-intentioned government will now have greater problems in addressing the needs of its people – yet addressing such needs is the basis of government authority.

The nation state is historically still rather new and, as Eric Hobsbawm points out, what constitutes a nation is very flexible. Many 'nations' in Africa are the consequence of colonial politics, and are formed by arbitrary lines on maps that have no relationships to local territorial or cultural differences. Many others are the product of the collapse at the end of the First World War of 'multi-national empires'. 'A nation', wrote the communist dictator, Joseph Stalin, 'is a historically evolved stable community of language, territory, economic life and psychological make up, manifested in a community of culture.' The attractions of nationality resonate differently in different parts of the world. No one worries that California will declare separate national identity from American – even though its economy is larger than over four-fifths of the world's other nations. Ernest Gellner, the political philosopher,

argued that nationality was ‘in the end a principle which holds that the political and the national unit should be congruent.’<sup>13</sup> Gellner’s idea was that urban industrialization led inevitably to nation-building. Moreover, many critics have disliked the nation state as a political form. As we shall see, wrote Hobsbawm, that most Olympian of left-wing historians, ‘the nation state is entirely irrelevant to the problems of the late twentieth century, for which it provides no general solutions. It merely complicates the task of addressing these problems.’<sup>14</sup> Indeed, the frailties of the nation state are now commonplaces of sociological theory and political journals. There is, writes John Dunn, a growing gap ‘between the causal capabilities of even the most advanced nation state, and the effective demands placed on the powers.’ Clearly, the issue of political responsibility in an internationalizing world is critical. The media, seeping images over national boundaries, and communications technologies undermining national self-determination, both contribute directly to this shift of power, and moreover are the carriers of other dissolving agents.

Globalization asserts the economic irrelevance of the nation state and claims that the same forces are dissipating cultural autonomy based on the nation for other, more temporary, allegiances. ‘The threat to cultural identity comes variously from trade, from mobile capital, from the free flow of ideas and images. But it also comes from migrant labour’, states a pamphlet produced by the radical (neither left- nor right-wing think-tank Demos), which both describes and indeed endorses the process.<sup>15</sup>

The communications revolution does mean that it is increasingly difficult for nations to protect their subjects from images, ideas, tastes even, of which they disapprove. The overthrow of the communist regimes in Eastern Europe was hastened by their domestic populations’ finally unstoppable desire for the Western media. In a rather different way, broadcasting certainly abetted more classic mass mobilization, both in China, and indeed in East Germany, where the sight on television of the huge immigration to the West finally brought down the Berlin Wall. States, of course, go on trying to prohibit what their subjects read and see, but new communications provide inventive mass samizdat alternatives. Thus the words of the Ayatollah Khomeini, the Iranian religious leader, exiled in Paris, rigorously banned from all public appearances, were nevertheless readily available throughout pre-revolutionary Iran: on tape.

In the recent past it was believed that the media would enhance the power of governments, but although the media are certainly important the effects are less simple than had been assumed; for example, one by-product of the telecommunications revolution may be that more angry ‘have nots’ can measure the privileges of the ‘haves’ with a more accurate eye. In a world marked, both within and between nations, by a steeply rising inequality, this may be dangerous.

Another aspect of the decline of nation states, it is argued – particularly vividly by politicians – is the usurping by the media of the nation state's right to formulate foreign policy. Thus, in America it has been suggested that 'real' time television, which shows events as they unfold, has begun to 'jump' governments into inappropriate action. Similarly, Douglas Hurd, when he was British Foreign Secretary, argued, 'there is nothing new in mass rape, in the shooting of civilians, in war crimes, in ethnic cleansing, in the burning of towns and cities. It has always happened. What is new is that a selection of these tragedies is now visible, within homes, to people around the world on television.'<sup>16</sup> On another occasion, a Foreign Office official added, 'it cannot be the object of foreign policy to wipe a tear from every eye – however much the cameras would like us to.' In America, a vigorous debate raged about the role of the media in compromising national defence and foreign policy. This evidence of media usurpation – dependent on the new technological capacity – is apparently an all too clear demonstration of the globalizers' analysis.

Something odd may be happening to how governments make policy, and the media may well be more influential. American foreign policy is increasingly governed by the 'body bag' factor; thus, while the American public can be made to back foreign intervention, they do not like to see on their television screens even one American harmed by fighting. Meanwhile, in Israel, when there was an Arab suicide bombing of an Israeli bus, the television cameras arrived with the police, before the ambulances, and the subsequent total coverage of the events certainly contributed to a drastic change in policy. The event was replayed, and its consequences became public, in a way which had a direct impact on government policy, and led to a rapid shift in Israeli politics. Yet even this process is by no means as clear as governments themselves claim. Nick Gowing, Channel 4's diplomatic editor, argued in a paper, based on extensive interviews, that governments were still well able to control news agendas. It is perhaps, at times, convenient for governments to be able to disclaim power.<sup>17</sup>

Yet, if the role of governments is changing, and the impact of the media is altering, does this mean that the nation state is dying? Eric Hobsbawm distinguishes between the 'epic' period of state-building at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, when states often attempted to subsume cultural and economic inequalities, and indeed reduce them by redistribution – from what he calls 'separatist' nationalism of the post-cold war period. Late twentieth-century politics, he argues sombrely, is marked by 'exclusionary identity politics'. This implies that group identity consists of some existential, supposedly primordial, unchangeable and therefore permanent personal characteristic shared with other members of the group and with absolutely no one else. It is this kind of nationalism that has led in part to the obscene resurgence of 'ethnic cleansing'. Yet, as the breakup of Bosnia showed, the media, so feted as the agents of globalization, are nevertheless fundamental to any process of separation and demonization as well.

Some of the more extreme believers in globalization, like Kenichi Ohmae, in his book *The End of the Nation State*, argue that these developments are merely 'localism'. They argue that increasingly small areas secede from nations in order to relate independently to larger economic or indeed political blocks, like the EC.<sup>18</sup> There is evidence of several different kinds of such 'separation'. Some may be the logical outcome of the 1980s' elevation of self over collective interests – in which wealthy regions seek separate identity and separate in order to keep more of their wealth to themselves rather than subsidize poorer regions. Thus, rich middle-class Staten Island voted to cede from poor ghettoized New York in 1992. Rich Catalonia seeks independence from the poorer Southern Spain, and there has even been the suggestion that Northern industrial Italy might jettison the agrarian South. On the other hand, as Paul Bew, the Irish historian has pointed out, devolution and independence are also frequently sought despite the fact that the break has no such advantages – and may even have considerable disadvantages. Commentators have therefore pointed to this process of fragmentation and realignment of social and economic forces as evidence of the impact of globalization. Part of the shift is said to be in politics from political divisions based on economic difference, to what a Demos pamphlet called a 'more diffuse and shifting world of competing styles'.

Nevertheless, however obstructive, inflexible and old-fashioned, the nation state exists, and however much its demise might be regarded as desirable, nearly all these splinters and shifts take place in the name of nationalism. Indeed, 'nationalism' is a rhetoric which articulates an increasing, *not* a decreasing number of interests. Territorial disputes and wars have multiplied in the post-cold war new world order. Moreover, the recent increase in the migration of populations, which is also credited with breaking down national barriers (though it is still nowhere near as large as the vast diasporas created by the Second World War), is also leading to a new phenomenon, that of extreme nationalism – at a distance. Thus, groups who see their future as citizens of the states where they have settled nevertheless advocate the most virulent nationalism in their nations of origin – the American Irish, the English Sikhs, the Tamils in Holland, Zionists in America, the Turks in Germany, the Estonians in America, are all radically nationalistic. This new nationalism about issues in their distant 'homes' is made possible and articulated by a whole new range of satellite and press media. The media help make new and old nationalism.

Nationalism, as a very old, crude and powerful device for defining the community as innocent and identifying the guilty thus may well continue to flourish in a post-cold war settlement. Everywhere, media rituals accompany the process of splintering and reforming. Thus, the 'homogenizing' impact of American global culture, which is seen as such an important corollary of economic globalization, appears to have less impact on political

identities than the orthodoxy requires. It is not that something is not happening, it is rather that the theory gets in the way of our capacity to examine the procedure.

Indeed, more than that, 'nationality' still remains a very robust way of categorizing systematic differences in the use and content of the media themselves. Viewing habits, computer preferences, film tastes, where and how the media are brought into homes, by whom they are used and for what purposes, are all remarkably different. A recent European Community report assessing the potential for the development of interactive services in European homes, concluded:

Alongside increasingly shared habits, tastes, and routines, there exist very profound and deep national differences. We cannot say whether any of these separate patterns will, in time, come to dominate the technology, but we can say that homes in different European nations are innovating and consuming technologies for new purposes – but in very different ways.

It also needs to be noted that the idea that global communications are making national government irrelevant slips with deceptive ease from a description to a proscription. Indeed, as liberal free market ideas became dominant in government policies in the 1980s and 1990s, many prominent social analysts apparently happily clambered on board, speculating that nations were now increasingly irrelevant in part because governments could hardly be expected to do anything, because the tide of technological history was against them. How could mere national governments seek to control their own citizens' conditions of labour, or protect their broadcasting preferences when they faced what sociologists Scott Lasch and John Urry called 'disorganized capital'? A system unable even to understand its own self-interest, but blindly moving forward nevertheless.

'Policies', 'intentions', 'plans', let alone 'commitments', it was widely suggested, were misguided – as they would not be implementable in the face of overriding global forces, and their consequences would be increasingly unpredictable. Thus, the new social theorists elaborated a minimalist role for government, which was a remarkably comfortable fit with how governments wanted to describe their own redefined purpose. Many social scientists were unwittingly elaborating theories which did very little more than justify a specific neo-liberal ideology.

Indeed, some of the most enthusiastic advocates of globalization theory argue that as a corollary of the new epoch, 'government' in general will be little more than reactive and modestly palliative at most. Ulrich Beck, an important German social scientist, suggests that



as political utopias have given away to discussions about side effects, it is noticeable that side effects risks fall under the responsibility of politics not business. That is to say business is not responsible for something over which it has control and politics is responsible for something over which it has no control.<sup>19</sup>

Beck says that we still look for politics ‘on the wrong pages of newspapers’ and he is contemptuously dismissive of the incompetence of ‘traditional, national, rituals of political processes’. What really matters is happening outside, beyond, somewhere other than old-fashioned ‘politics’.

Yet it is not only the case that nation states and nationality are still far more meaningful in media and political terms, as we have seen, than the strong globalizers have argued, but also nation states, however unsatisfactorily, are also still unavoidably the basis for global or regional regulation. Policies do get made, they have effects, and national governments make them. There has recently been a proliferation in international agencies, and while these may well represent important attempts to produce institutions that can come to terms with the internationalization of world affairs, of the 387 that have been developed in the period between 1990 and 1995, nearly 300 were the product of direct contact between national governments. There is a paradox here; the nation state may be part of the problem, but the development of institutions to address global problems still depends on nation states.

Part of the global theorists’ orthodoxy is that ‘policy’ is irrelevant, because it is unsustainable, and its consequences unpredictable. Yet this is at odds with what we know about the most advanced economic products. These are now the result of increasingly sophisticated knowledge and expertise. This in turn is the product of policy. Thus, for example, creation of a new drug-mimicking gene in medical research represents a complex history of research. The role of the whole social and political environment, and indeed the consequences of policies, are highly significant in the production of such goods. Thus what Ozawa calls ‘market enabling incentives’ are actually more important than ever before. In turn, Denning argues that precisely because competition is so fierce, ‘everything that governments do affects location decisions and outcomes’.<sup>20</sup> Thus policies are not made irrelevant by globalization, indeed economic development may be more sensitively dependent on them.

Indeed, the strong global theorists seem to have been listening to what governments have been saying they do - rather than watching how governments have been behaving. In many ways the rhetoric of ‘minimalist’ government of the 1980s served to mask a quite different reality, one in which governments increased their control over many areas of social life. All over the developed world, the process called ‘privatization’ has meant little more than hollowing out previously independent organizations by what was, in effect, state patronage.

Governments are changing how and where they intervene, but they have not simply made themselves redundant.

Globalization thus points to the internationalization inherent in some aspects of media developments – but hardly accounts for the complexity of what has actually happened. Nations still exist, and indeed are needed. National preferences still exist, national patterns of media use and habit still exist. Policies about resources and distribution, though more difficult to get right and in some areas beyond the control of individual nation states, matter more, not less.

### **The media and the global personality**

Globalization may be a big theory about the world, but such is its ambition that it is also said to have influenced – through the media – how we feel and how we relate to one another. We have, apparently, new characters and new human potentials for a new epoch.

Television is said to be the agent of this transformation. Ulrich Beck, in his best-selling book, wrote, ‘Television isolates and standardizes. . . . On the one hand it removes people from conventional experiences. At the same time everyone is in a similar position, they all consume institutionally produced programmes. Television produces the standardized collective existence of isolated man – hermits the world over.’ Anthony Giddens, in a similar vein, says that in ‘personal life’ there is a movement ‘away from relationships symbolically or actually functional to “pure relationships”’. These are apparently ‘entered into and sustained for their own sake and for no more than the rewards that associating with others can bring’. To go along with this suspiciously neat ideal type, Anthony Giddens describes a novel ‘democracy of the emotions’. ‘Emotional articulacy’, or the capacity to describe feelings (though presumably even Giddens is not suggesting that those who do not describe them do not have them) is seen as a necessary product of a newly globalized world. Sexuality, feelings, relationships are to be chosen and need to be expressed because they can no longer be taken for granted. The mass media, agony aunts, soap operas, self-help manuals, the exploration of the self are remaking us into ‘individuals in every sense’. So ‘flexible’ will be this modern self that you will be able, as it were, to shop around for a soul, and no doubt swap an inconvenient or old-fashioned one for something more up to date.

This is all little more than an oddly optimistic inversion of Marcuse’s dystopic theories of the commodification of private life (or an opportunistic post-modernist philanderer’s charter – relationships without responsibility). The argument is that these ‘new’ selves are both a product of and necessary for the further globalization of society. It is also, of course, the wholesale transcription and endorsement of neo-liberal emphasis on choice of identity – with the media now elevated to midwives of the self.

This suspiciously Weberian complicity of theory with progress – that personality formation now offers new opportunities for choice – hardly fits with the way in which most people in most societies experience personal choices. Indeed, that more marriages end in divorce is no more adequately explained by an increase in ‘choice’ than is a suicide rate. Even more strange is the basis of these ideas about ‘emotional liberty’ in assumptions about the impact of the media on our new flexible selves. There is overwhelming evidence about the impact of the media on institutional forms. There is very good reason to believe that the media influence some people in some circumstances in some ways. However, it is equally clearly known that there are no ‘generalizable’ media effects on individuals. The media do not simply ‘make’ people more violent or more loving. Moreover, theories about personal relationships have become more complex. In the past, theorists of economic development argued that marriages based on tradition and authority would, as societies ‘modernized’, be superseded by ‘romantic’ individualistic attachment. Yet we now know that the movement towards economic modernizations does not simply reproduce cultural values. Thus, fundamentalist religious movements frequently combine advanced economic practices with savagely reinforced traditional sexual moralities. Similarly, many sociologists claimed as a matter of self-evident development that the working-class extended family would inevitably be replaced by the nuclear middle-class version; yet in American and Europe, numerous studies have begun to reveal the re-emergence of the extended family across all classes as providers of acceptable child care for working mothers. There is simply no evidence that media have led to ‘global’ people with standardized global feelings. Some feelings they share, some they share less. Something interesting may well be happening to people’s feelings and identities – but the strong globalization theories merely foreclose enquiry.

### **Choosing and meaning**

Globalization is also seen as the agent of a whole series of shifts said to characterize a new era in the late twentieth century. ‘Mass production, mass consumers, the big city, the big brother state, the sprawling housing estate, and the nation state are all in decline – flexibility, diversity, differentiation, mobility, decentralization, and internationalization, are in the ascendant. We are in transition to a new era’, wrote one prophet in 1988 in an article called ‘New times’.<sup>21</sup>

In the more extreme elaboration of these kinds of idea – in ideas derived from literary theory – it was also suggested that ‘texts’ (books written by authors, but also, of course, media products) were little more than an opportunity for different ‘readers’ to construct their own ‘meanings’. All these theories had in common a scepticism about the existence of objective reality, let alone the possibility of arriving at an agreed understanding of it by rational means. They also elevated the cultural critic (or the consumer) at the expense of the producers (who,

it was averred, did not know what they were doing, and whose intended, or even unintended, meanings were irrelevant to the more significant ‘construction’ of meanings by critics and readers). Of course, all this was very comforting and enhancing for critics, who according to their own account became far more important than the hapless ‘authors’.

However, beneath this was another, perhaps more sinister compliance that the ‘critics’ themselves failed to recognize. The proliferation of media channels and opportunities had by no means been accompanied by investment in, or indeed a radical reappraisal of, how understandings and knowledge are produced. Indeed, all public, publicly owned, publicly accessible, available knowledge, research constructed around the pursuit of knowledge not profit, ways of manipulating data and understanding were, all over the world, in crisis. Ways of financing the production of media products – the software – were not rethought. This was not the product of some blind, inexorable technological force, globalization, but rather the pursuit of particular policies, based on particular ideologies, in particular places.

### **Plenitude and scarcity**

Yet it is a key contention of the globalization theorists that the new communications technology means that there is a novel, positively orgiastic plenitude of information and ‘meanings’ available to everyone, so they suggest that to worry about production is absurd. We will be our own ‘producers’.

Bill Gates, in his dismal utopian vision of a ‘microsoft’ world – *The Village* – has a vocabulary packed with images of plenty and excess. Admittedly, all this splendid novelty goes into ‘the home of the future’ (which he is building for himself) and it delivers such breathtaking expansions of human capacity as never having to open a window, and having the kettle ready boiling and your favourite television programme showing as you walk through the door (the home computer will do it for you). Quite why the technology of the future should share so many features with the housewife of the past is puzzling. However, the book is phrased in the familiar if, in this example, rather tired language of excess.

However, a more cheering aspect of Mr Gates’ ideal home is that on the walls you could display ‘any great picture from any great gallery the world over, in your home, at will’. What he doesn’t mention is that his corporation has been steadily purchasing the reproduction rights from the great galleries. So what you could once see either freely, or via a charge to the gallery, will in the future inevitably enhance Mr Gates’ own profits.

Information is seen as a new ‘strategic resource’, and writers from Toffler onwards have talked about the ‘global information gladiators’ or what Baudrillard has called the ‘information blizzard’ or Lyotard ‘message gluttony’. Television executives routinely now

use the language of ‘infinite capacity and infinite choice’. A kind of cerebral gargantuanism with a Rabelaisian panorama of novel exotic media delights is promised.

In some ways the plenitude argument is self-evidently right. Never has it been harder to avoid aesthetic experience. No doubt in the past, shepherds and peasants (especially those familiar with the poetry of Wordsworth or John Clare) derived intense pleasure from the familiar beauties of nature. They certainly had aesthetic experiences. But what is new is that streets and homes, public and private places, are now bombarded with images, purposively demanding response.

Indeed, in other areas the reformatory capacity of the information revolution stretches everywhere; huge expanses of human government bureaucracy will soon be dispensed with, using new technology. Arming citizens with ‘smart cards’ from cradle to grave, insurance, tax, health, driving status, rights to benefits, and obligations, could all be encoded in the card’s records. Government health and welfare bureaucracies could and probably will be replaced by systems better able to code and evaluate evidence more cheaply. It may release more resources for services, it may well reshape government.

However, ‘plenitude’ is in all these cases equated with ‘better’, or ‘good’. Again, the reality will be more complex. There will, for example, be greater opportunities for surveillance. Yet nowhere is the contradiction between information or communication excess – and what it may actually mean – more stark than in the changes the communication revolution is bringing to news and news production.

Here the rhetoric is the now classic one of immensity and opportunity. New twenty-four-hour news services, new television channels, devoted to nothing but news, more news, from more places, faster, hotter news, with more pictures, national, local, international news on demand. If the global communication revolution started with Reuters cabling the world in the 1860s, then news surely represents the apogée of all that the globalizing theorists claim for the new epoch – and of course it is abundantly self-evident that there is a great deal ‘more’ news around than there used to be.

Yet, on closer examination, this turns out to be true only in a rather limited sense. News has always been a commodity, but recently newsgathering capacity has been savagely cut. Now, fewer journalists produce more stories more frequently. Increasingly, they have little time to understand the complex background of developing affairs. Understanding requires time, time costs, and reporters everywhere may be becoming more, not less, vulnerable to the well-packaged official lines produced, not only by governments, but by the armies of lobbyists employed by every conceivable interest to promote – and kill – stories.<sup>22</sup> Thus fewer journalists know less, cost less, are approached by ever more publicists, lobbyists and spin doctors, but they produce material that is disseminated more powerfully to more places.

New technologies of communication, satellite, cable, instantaneous transmission of pictures together with more stations, channels, and programmes, and the rise of the 'rolling newscast', and 'continuous news on demand', literally mean that deadlines occur so frequently that journalists have less time to collect – or order – news. Indeed, the 'news' room itself may be being displaced, as the editing is increasingly controlled by those with an interest in how they are presented. Presidential and parliamentary campaigns now work very hard indeed to produce media events that will unavoidably be chosen for television screens. That is what a 'photo-opportunity', at its crudest, represents. Martin Bell, the BBC's redoubtable war correspondent, writes, 'More news means worse. The multiplicity of deadlines takes us away from the real world and drives us back into our offices and edit suites. It is safer there.'<sup>23</sup> The man who was wounded on screen points out that, in nasty brutal wars where journalists are increasingly seen as key targets, 'we may find reasons to stay there'.

This process is made worse by the relentless competitive pressure on news organizations. Newspapers everywhere face slowly but steadily declining circulations; broadcasters everywhere face more stations competing for only slowly expanding audiences. Some suggest the effects of this will be benign; editorializing and the news room as the place where news is ordered and constructed (and, tacitly, it is suggested, biased) will decline. News will be, it is suggested, more like evidence and less like argument. However, at the moment, the clearest impact of the competition is not the abolition of news values, but rather a radical shift in them. News values are becoming more sensational, local and personal. They are becoming less about news – in the sense of things that citizens in a democracy need to know to exercise informed choices, and more about scandals and attracting audience attention. Indeed, a greater volume of news, on more channels, has not so far served to stretch news values. More has not meant different, in depth, more revealing, better informed news.

Moreover, news dies faster than ever before. We can, because of the global communications revolution, have an instantaneous 'real time' relationship to unfolding events. Yet this has come to mean that unless it is ingeniously managed, news is what is happening now, however trivial. It is not that there is no appetite for subtle, knowledgeable – even objective – news. The BBC's World Service has been increasingly popular with audiences, despite ever tighter constraints, precisely because of its generous, innovative, searching news values. Yet, the impact of the global communication revolution on news is so far producing quite the opposite to this kind of genre. At the moment, at least, issues which matter apparently die as fast as the trivial and absurd. In turn, this influences how we deal with wars and coups, famines and injustices abroad and at home. But the impact is not merely produced by 'volume'. More news is not the same as important news, indeed there is only in one rather limited sense more of it at all.<sup>24</sup>

The cornucopian imagery of global information plenitude is not merely unhelpful, it is misleading. More of anything is not necessarily benign, and globalization does not produce a land of milk and honey with no scarcity. We should address the emerging distributions of goods and services, not dream that no choices need be made. There may be hugely increased public 'access' to information made available by the new technology, but the information is not free. Indeed, so far we have hardly begun to increase public rights to this potential knowledge.

Indeed, one of the emerging crises in the new technology revolution is the financing of the production of knowledge. Piracy is endemic to many of the new technologies (though this is an issue the transnational corporations take seriously – it affects their profits – and will no doubt solve), the piracy of CDs and software is common everywhere. Unless we are, like many of the 'new' television channels, merely going to endlessly recycle our past in the brand new future, there are gathering problems about funding future culture. We listen to more CDs, but we go to fewer concerts, we consume more literature, but fewer authors make a living by writing.<sup>25</sup> Scientists are enjoined to raise research funds from private companies, who will then 'own' their results.<sup>26</sup> Universities are increasingly inadequately funded. Thus the potential for 'digital' television to offer extraordinary new services and opportunities is huge. However, if that unknown potential is to be liberating, novel, and to lead the public into thoughts and issues they had not expected, and needs that they did not know they had, it will need investment. Investment for purposes beyond that of short-term profit. In fact, scarcity is still here, the cornucopian imagery of the information explosion is a chimera – misleading us into believing that the only 'choices' to be made will be private ones.

### ***Fin de siècle nihilism and globalization***

The global communications revolution – and the future it is fast moulding – is often discussed as if were too large and too inexorable for anything to be done about it. On the one hand, there is a resigned assertion of the paralysis of politics and irrelevancy of all that is past, and on the other a radiant faith in the inherent novelty of a technologically transformed world. The collapse of Eastern Europe and the end of the cold war gave added impetus to these ideas, because – whatever the reality – the conflict had provided the basis to support many ideas about the possibility of alternative social arrangements. The society we are now told we will get will apparently be constituted out of the myriad choices made by information and media consumers. It is as if we now believe that 'public good', indeed 'global good' will emerge (or may not emerge but nothing can be done about it) mysteriously out of the individual pursuit of self-interest and corporations' pursuit of profit. There is a powerful belief in the force of

communications to reshape everything they touch. Nothing, as it were, can be done, but something new will emerge is the message.

### *Fin de siècle blues*

Of course, a profoundly introverted sense of a propulsion towards the future has happened before – at the end of the nineteenth century. A strong sense of inevitable and meaningless change was then part of social understanding:

Life no longer dwells in the whole. The word becomes sovereign and leaps out of the sentence, the sentence reaches out and obscures the meaning of the page, the page gains life at the expense of the whole – all, everywhere, is the anarchy of atoms, the disaggregation of the will, the hopelessness of intention facing the maelstrom.<sup>27</sup>

So wrote Nietzsche – the great nineteenth-century philosopher – of the impossibility of action in modern conditions. Last time around, *fin de siècle* thinkers became increasingly obsessed with culture as the only worthwhile value. Moreover, it was seen as one divorced from any political or social consequences or meaning, ‘Art for Art’s Sake’ alone. Part of this was a melancholic apathy about what could be done. But it was accompanied by a belief in the value of chaos. These were the dominant leitmotifs of the period.

At the end of the nineteenth century this was combined with an almost transcendent hope in the possibilities of scientific and technological solutions to the world’s problems: ‘all are awaiting the birth of a new order of things . . . industrial applications by a single electronic impulse will make the same thought vibrate between five continents. The axis is displaced and the world must crack that its equilibrium be restored’, wrote a French socialist critic in the late 1880s.

In France, neo-impressionist painters believed that in the future painting could be based on what was ‘real’, not what people believed they saw. In the past they argued art had been based on intuitions about how things ‘really’ looked but, in the future, they said it would be based on scientific theory. The true identity of colour would be revealed by scientific research. In England, Fabian reformers believed that the scrupulous scientific observation of social problems would by itself reveal what had to be done to eradicate them. Science, it was believed, would transform and improve human society. Thus a *fin de siècle* period is marked by a belief that something momentous is ending, and something epochal is about to happen. Pedestrian ideas about empirical observation, cautious policies, pragmatic views of change, are exchanged for far grander and more finite ideas.



So perhaps some aspect of orthodox ‘globalization’ theories are just an expression of *fin de siècle* fears and hopes? Certainly, as we have seen, they are far too wide to be able to describe many of the things that are actually happening. Huge changes are gathering speed, but in order to deal with these, we need evidence not speculation (let alone politically convenient speculation). It is not that the world is not changing, but that globalization – a useful rallying call to martial attention – is now more of a hindrance than a help in our increasingly important need to understand just what is happening. The convenient, melodramatic assertion that change is beyond control is lazy and absurd. None of the ‘causes’ of globalization, like Topsy, ‘just grew’, they happened because choices were being made. Nor will the ‘new’ millennium emerge out of the blue. Tastes in the media, uses for the media, ways of communication, have not reached some final state, they still go on developing and changing.

One of the more intriguing aspects of contemporary ideas is the extent to which watching television – apparently a humble enough activity – has become a resonant metaphor for many aspects of late twentieth-century life. Television watching is seen as private, symptomatic of pathology and opportunity. Robert Putnam, an American political scientist, concluded, in one work based on over twenty years’ study of Italian politics, that ‘the pattern is stark: one could have predicted the success or failure of government in Italy in the 1980s with extraordinary accuracy from the pattern of civic engagement nearly a century earlier’. Putnam then went on, in another work, to demonstrate that the ‘cause’ of civic disengagement, which he sees as spreading like a disease, disabling, depopulating civic institutions throughout American life, is television watching.<sup>28</sup> Women working, family break-up, urban dislocation, changes in work habits and hours, unemployment and over-employment, make no difference to whether Americans participate in the institutions of civic life, he claimed. However, being brought up in a television-watching democracy does. It is an extravagant claim – but a scrupulously researched one. That does not mean that it is right, but at least it prompts an argument.

Perhaps what we need, as we consider how communication and information may be reshaping how we live and our institutions, is a little more scepticism and a lot more evidence. It is not that things are not changing, nor that the future will not be radically different. But we need to know more about what is happening in governments and news rooms, in concerts, sitting rooms and in the recording studios. It might also be helpful if, rather than saying that we know what shape the future holds – and consequently abdicating any responsibility for it – we began to ask again what it might be possible to do to make it better.

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## *The sociology of the mass media*

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Do newspapers, broadcasting, and mass entertainment matter? Do they change society or merely reflect the changes created by others? This chapter will argue that the media do have an independent influence, but not in the sense that has often been assumed. The power of the press and broadcasting is not necessarily greatest when the political involvement in the media is most apparent.

One (determinist) tradition has stressed the relationship of the media with the governing class. It has argued that the media play an important part in modern society. Another (empirical or pluralist) school has looked at the response of audiences to the media, and has concluded that other social pressures overrule any independent effect. These two approaches have been regarded as opposed to one another. In fact, as we will show, they are not incompatible.

### **The Frankfurt School and the power of the press and broadcasting**

‘Propaganda, propaganda, propaganda,’ Hitler said after the unsuccessful Munich *putsch* in 1923. ‘All that matters is propaganda.’ Although the Nazis emphasized the importance of oratory and public meetings, they were also fascinated by the emergence of the new technologies of mass communication in the USA and Britain. In particular they saw radio and film as a means of extending the influence of demagogy.

When Hitler came to power in 1933, a group of German intellectuals opposed to the new regime – and seeking to explain the fascist success – turned their attention to the role of the media. The so-called ‘Frankfurt School’ of writers argued that the roots of the fascist or ‘authoritarian’ personality were to be found in the nature of the family. However, in explaining what made a population potentially fascist, or why there was no revolt before the Nazi regime began to use widespread force, they also saw the press, radio, films, and even comics and popular music as reinforcing these early influences. The new mass media strengthened the habits and attitudes which made people susceptible to fascist arguments .

*The USA, mass culture, and Europeans*

Many members of the Frankfurt School became refugees and settled in the USA, for which they developed a profound distaste. Disorientated and homesick they reacted against every aspect of the American way of life. They concluded that American mass culture was an irreversible force which was destroying superior European cultural traditions. What was worse, mass culture produced precisely the kinds of personality traits that made the population vulnerable to fascist domination. The Frankfurt writers believed, incorrectly, that the USA was also about to become fascist, as Germany had done before.

However, their reaction to mass culture is better understood as part of a more general European response to the USA. The Frankfurt analysis of the role of the press, films, and later television is very similar to that of the literary critic F. R. Leavis. Broadcasting, Leavis argued in 1932, was 'little more than a means of passive diversion but one that made active recreation, especially active use of the mind, more difficult'. And, in an essay called 'Mass civilization and minority culture', he concluded that 'The prospects of culture, then, are very dark. There is less room for hope, in that a standardized civilization is rapidly enveloping the world.' Many of Leavis's views on the USA during this period had been formed by reading a book by Robert and Helen Lynd called *Middletown*. This described the increasing isolation of individuals, social fragmentation, and the pervasiveness of the profit motive in a typical American town.

Thus the Frankfurt School writers shared with many other European social and literary critics a revulsion against American culture. Much of the work of writers like Marcuse and Adorno on the media was based on a rejection of that which was modern, mass, and American.

*Liberalism and the individual and the emergence of fascism*

The Frankfurt critics, both in Germany and later in the USA, were concerned to explain the failure of liberalism, and of the liberal emphasis on freedom of speech, expression, and creativity. Writers like Adorno, Marcuse, and Arendt (although she can only loosely be described as a member of this group) pointed to what they saw as the weakness of these concepts in practice. These ideals, the Frankfurt writers believed, had degenerated into a corrupt and selfish individualism. The mass media had played a major part in this process: manipulating society by vulgarizing its culture. In an essay called 'The end of Utopia', Marcuse wrote, 'Today we have the capacity to turn the world into hell and we are well on the way to doing so.'

According to the Frankfurt School the unique individual personality was being destroyed by society. Adorno wrote in *Prisms* of the illusory importance and autonomy of private life which conceals the fact that it 'drags on only as an appendage of the social process'. The

celebration of the home, family, and the individual which characterized liberal thought and bourgeois life in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was already decayed. 'Nothing proved easier to destroy than the privacy and private morality of people who thought of nothing but safeguarding their private lives,' argued Arendt.<sup>1</sup> Totalitarianism was seen as both a cause of this process, and an effect of it.

The Frankfurt School saw the loss of individuality as the cause of dependence on great mass organizations. This analysis implied that society had returned to a more primitive form of association. The interdependence of highly specialized individuals, or what Durkheim called 'organic solidarity', had been succeeded by a new and barbarous homogeneity. Only a 'mechanical' cohesion was possible, dependent on similarity and standardization. Horkheimer argued that, paradoxically, individuality was impaired by the decline in the impulse for collective action. 'As the ordinary man withdraws from participating in political affairs, society tends to revert to the law of the jungle, which crushes all vestiges of individuality,' he wrote.<sup>2</sup> In this analysis the Frankfurt theorists were claiming that totalitarianism emerged as a result of corrupt social institutions and the decline of liberal principles.

There was also another explanation of the success of fascism, which might be characterized as a paranoid theory of change. In this a stealthy process of substitution occurs. This constitutes a Gresham's law of culture and personality, in which bad inexorably drives out good.

The mass media are the key agents of this process. They replace real cultural values with their 'look alikes'. This view that the media provide an ersatz inferior culture is an important element in the Frankfurt explanation of totalitarianism, which assumed that many of the changes brought about through the media would be fought if they were recognized. Horkheimer wrote in *The Eclipse of Reason* that

Just as the slogans of rugged individualism are politically useful to large trusts in society seeking exemption from social control, so in mass culture the rhetoric of individuality, by imposing patterns for collective imitation, subverts the very principle to which it gives lip service.

Adorno, in a book called *The Jargon of Authenticity*, explains how the 'mass media can create an aura which makes the spectator seem to experience a non-existent actuality'. This subversion of values is a process which Hayek (a writer who came to rather different conclusions) also observed. 'To make a totalitarian system function effectively,' he wrote, 'it is not enough that everybody should be forced to work for the same ends. It is essential that people should come to regard them as their own ends.' The easiest way to do this, he argued, was to substitute new meanings for familiar and respected values, like liberty and freedom.

There is a third explanation of the success of totalitarianism in the work of the Frankfurt writers. In this totalitarianism emerges as the inevitable product of capitalism: the final subjugation of every aspect of life to commercial values. 'The individual now reproduces on the deepest level, in his instinctual structure, the values and behaviour patterns that serve to maintain domination,' wrote Marcuse.

Thus the School suggests three competing explanations of the emergence of fascism. The first sees totalitarian success as a consequence of the attrition of institutions. As Lasswell wrote, 'The Nazis came to power because of weak democracy.'<sup>3</sup> The second suggests that formerly vital values were hollowed out, and replaced with deluding substitutes. The third that fascism did not emerge by default but by evolution.<sup>4</sup> But whatever the explanation, the Frankfurt writers were agreed on one point: the new mass media were not merely a tool of totalitarianism, they were a major reason for its existence.

### *Entertainment*

Above all else (according to the Frankfurt School) radio, film, popular music, and television share an overriding concern to entertain. This was the ultimate form of corruption. Indeed for these writers, 'entertainment' occupies much the same kind of role as self-abuse in pre-Freudian medical literature.

Entertainment promised relief and relaxation but, Rosenberg argued, 'Far from dispelling unrest, all the evidence on hand now suggests that mass culture exacerbates it.' Indeed the atomized individuals of mass society lose their souls to the phantom delights of the film, the soap opera, and the variety show. They fall into a stupor. This apathetic hypnosis Lazarsfeld was to call the 'narcotizing dysfunction' of exposure to the mass media.

Entertainment thus led to blindness and lunacy. 'It is becoming increasingly plain', wrote Adorno in *The Authoritarian Personality*, 'that people do not behave in such a way as to further their interests, even when it is clear to them what these interests are.' People, it was argued, became insensitive to their own needs.

'The unreal delights and the frenzied fascination' of the mass media prevented them from acting collectively. They became the irrational victims of false wants. Marcuse argued that addiction to the media resulted in an absolute docility: the public had 'been enchanted and transformed into a clientèle by the suppliers of popular culture.' Reisman developed the analogy in *The Lonely Crowd*: 'Glamour in politics, the packaging of the leader, the treatment of the events by the mass media, substitutes for the self-interest of the inner directed man, the abandonment to society of the outer directed man.'

### *Industrialization and leisure*

The Frankfurt School argued that leisure – empty time filled with entertainment – had been industrialized. The production of culture had become standardized and dominated by the

profit motive as in other industries. In a mass society leisure was constantly used to induce the appropriate values and motives in the public. The modern media trained the young for consumption. “‘The sphere of pleasure’ has itself become a sphere of cares,” Reisman argued. Leisure had ceased to be the opposite of work, and had become a preparation for it.

The repetition of the forms of the mass media resembled the monotony of the assembly line: what Adorno called ‘The ever-changing production of what is always the same’. In this process, it was argued, culture is consumed by the process of industrialization. Marcuse pointed at the practice of listening to serious music while doing other things (the phenomenon of ‘Bach in the kitchen’). Music presented as ‘classic’, he suggested, ‘comes to life as other than itself. The fact that modern methods of reproduction have increased the quantity of music, art, and literature available to the public does not mean that culture spreads to the masses; rather that culture is destroyed in order to make entertainment.

‘At its worst mass culture threatens not merely to cretinize our taste’, argues Rosenberg, ‘but to brutalize our senses while paving the way to totalitarianism.’ Lazarsfeld and Merton put the case succinctly: ‘Economic power seems to have reduced direct exploitation and to have turned to a subtler type of psychological exploitation,’ they wrote of the USA in the 1950s. Overt totalitarian force was increasingly obsolescent. Radio, film, and television seemed even more effective than terror in producing compliance.

### *Complexity and mass culture*

The Frankfurt School argued that although the messages of the media might be simple, explaining them was not. The overt content of any programme, film, or newspaper was merely the basis for interpretation. The mass media appeared to confirm the traditional values of British puritanical middle-class society. The real message they communicated, however, was one of ‘adjustment and unreflecting obedience’. It was necessary to analyse not only the content, but also the form of the media and the way in which they were used. ‘The trouble with the educated philistine’, wrote Arendt, ‘was not that he read the classics, but that he did so prompted by the ulterior motive of self-perfection.’ Nothing, for the Frankfurt School, was what it seemed. It was always worse.

Their view of the illusion of apparent social relations was part of a developing analysis during the 1940s. Lasswell’s *Psychopathology and Politics* had claimed ‘that the significance of political opinions is not to be grasped apart from the private motives which they symbolized’. Political motives ‘derive their vitality from the displacement of private effects upon public objects’. Later, in a bleak article written in 1941 on ‘The garrison state’, Lasswell also suggested that although ‘instrumental democracy may be in abeyance the media will doubtless continue to purvey the symbols of mystic democracy’.

Indeed capitalist culture was so powerful that it could even use opposition to further its own interests. As Benjamin wrote in *Illuminations*,

We are confronted with the fact . . . that the bourgeois apparatus of production and publication is capable of assimilating, indeed of propagating an astonishing amount of revolutionary themes without ever seriously putting into question its own continued existence – or that of the class which owns it.

It follows from this that only that culture which was not assimilable and difficult to understand could be the source of genuine opposition.

### *Mass society theorists and the power of the media*

The concern of Adorno, Arendt, and their colleagues with the direct psychological impact of the new media was in part a product of their experience in Germany. The rise of Hitler encouraged the Frankfurt School to view all mass audiences with suspicion, as though they were indistinguishable in behaviour and malleability from the crowds at a Nazi rally.

These writers also, however, developed another more long-term concept of the power of the media. Marcuse commented in *One Dimensional Man*:

Objections are made that we greatly overrate the indoctrinating power of the media and that by themselves people would feel and satisfy the needs that are now superimposed upon them. This objection misses the point. The preconditioning does not start with the mass production of radio or TV. The people enter this stage as preconditioned receptacles of long standing. In this more complex view the public do not abdicate rational consideration of their interest blindly. More subtly, the whole basis of rational calculation is undermined.

Nevertheless, even this more complex explanation has a simple goal. 'Ideology for the Frankfurt School works one way,' Swingewood has commented, 'that is from above, seeping into working-class consciousness as an alien and conservative force.' Even leisure had been reduced to an adjunct of capitalism, its sole purpose 'the restoration of the human labour force for labour',<sup>5</sup> while all human needs had been redirected into 'consumption' – the destructive exhaustion of resources rather than their creative use. As a consequence the Frankfurt School saw the function of the media, whether in the long run or more directly, as controlling the public in the interests of capital.



It is here that the Frankfurt analysis is most vulnerable. What appears to be a particular account of the media is actually a view of capitalist institutions in general. Indeed the very strength of the Frankfurt analysis is dissipated in its generality.

### **Pluralism: the role of personal influence on the reaction of the audience to the media**

The power of the media, and the pessimistic Frankfurt model of industrial society, were tested, challenged, and apparently refuted by American empirical researchers. A series of major surveys seemed to show that the media had very little influence on popular opinion.

In an odd way, the small town American gossip came to the rescue of democracy. Survey findings seemed to prove that people were not the isolated atomized automatons suggested by mass society theory. Thus the inhabitants of places which sounded like the locations for John Ford movies – Erie County, Decatur, Elmira, and Rovere – appeared oblivious to, rather than hypnotized by, the blandishments of media propaganda. Far more important influences were provided by friends, neighbours, and drinking companions – whether people were deciding which presidential candidate to vote for or what brand of cornflakes to have for breakfast. It was personal contact, not media persuasiveness, that counted.

Market research methods were used to investigate whether the press and broadcasting had an effect on public attitudes. However, the concept of an ‘effect’ which was used in this research was very limited. Media messages were compared to ‘bullets’ and the only effects evaluated were immediate changes in audience attitudes.

#### *Conceptualizing the power of the media*

Nevertheless, empirical research as a whole has at least begun to question the way in which we understand the effects of the media. Thus writers on the press and broadcasting have credited the media with the power to ‘influence’ or ‘persuade’ their audience, to ‘change attitudes’, or even to ‘affect behaviour’.

Yet these terms are imprecise and obscure. What is it to persuade or influence? All of the terms which are used to describe what the media do have a behaviourist basis, in which a single and external force – the media – has an impact on a single subject – the person. The empirical studies, in a very limited way, have re-examined these concepts. In a narrow attempt to measure effects they have at least dislodged terms which otherwise have been unquestioned.

The empirical work is inadequate. The theories which underlie our understanding of the media might be revealed more usefully than in an attempt to measure problematic phenomena. Indeed the early survey tradition of the 1940s and 1950s eventually abandoned interest in the media. However, it is possible to discuss the problem of how the power of the

media might be conceptualized in examining the empirical work. For, as yet, there is no adequate vocabulary to describe the relationships between the media, individuals, and society.

### *Reinforcement*

Early surveys seemed to show that the media did not change people's minds. 'Paradoxically campaign propaganda exerted one major effect – by producing no overt effect on voting behaviour at all – if by the latter "effect" we naïvely mean a change in vote,' wrote Lazarsfeld in 1944. In fact the media confirmed people in the opinions which they already held. Propaganda marshalled the faithful. It did not 'win over' the wavering or the opposed.

As election campaigns progressed, however, people became more interested in politics, but only because more of them had made up their minds. 'Thus they became both more likely to pay attention', wrote Schramm, 'and less likely to be converted as the campaign goes on.' Previously it had been assumed that 'floating' voters, in their attempt to arrive at a rational decision, would be the most avid consumers of information. But, because they were undecided, they appeared to be uninterested. 'As a group', wrote Trenaman and McQuail later in 1961, 'the "don't knows" were less well informed than consistent voters by as much as 25 per cent . . . showing a general lack of information, and not just an ignorance of particular policies or the policies of one particular party.' However, even 'reinforcement' was insufficient on its own.

### *Personal influence*

The research showed that the audience was not homogeneous, and society was not a simple, centrally controlled hierarchy. There were strong defences against people being persuaded in spite of themselves. Further, some members of the audience had a role in the persuasion of others. Ideas, it was argued, 'flow from radio and print *to* the opinion leaders, and *from* them to the less active sections of the population'.<sup>6</sup>

The power which personal contact exercised over people's views was examined by Katz and Lazarsfeld in a study of women 'opinion leaders'. The study, done in the late 1940s, seemed to show that some individuals of high social status had little effect on other people's views, while some of low status were important opinion leaders. Personal influence 'intervened' between the message of the media and its reception by the public. Consequently it impeded any attempt at mass indoctrination by the media. What could be more satisfactory than to find that in a democracy wealth and power do not buy opinion?

It was also argued that opinion leaders were not a narrow élite. The same study showed that a high proportion of women were exercising influence over others in matters of

marketing, fashion, movies, and politics. Moreover, the diffusion patterns of influence and the characteristics of opinion leadership were different for each area.

Thus it was concluded that the media had little or no independent effect on public opinion. Indeed rather than changing attitudes, behaviour, or the world it seemed that they merely confirmed the status quo.

### *Findings the researchers ignored*

In fact it is possible to look at the findings of these surveys in another way and draw quite different conclusions. What appears insignificant when buried in a range of figures dealing with breakfast cereals and film stars becomes more interesting if taken on its own. Status and opinion leadership, for example, were not correlated in most areas, except public affairs. Here high-status women appeared to exercise considerably more influence than low-status women. The assumption that consumer behaviour and political behaviour obey the same rules is not supported in these findings. Hence it would be dangerous to take for granted that the media – as opposed to opinion leaders – shape opinions about consuming and opinions about voting in identical ways.

Election surveys of the 1940s and early 1950s are also open to reinterpretation. ‘Not every public opinion change involved a personal contact,’ Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet admit in their study *The People’s Choice*. ‘Fifty-eight per cent [of the changes not the changers] were made without any remembered personal contact and were very often dependent upon the mass media’ (these changes were widely distributed amongst those who changed their views at all). This effect was ignored.<sup>7</sup> It was concluded that the media had little influence. Becker and McCombs have also shown other contradictions in these studies. In the Erie County survey a high proportion of electors who intended to vote Republican at the start of the campaign but who were exposed to Democrat propaganda switched to Democrat by polling day. Yet this finding was also ignored.

These studies did not show that the media had no effect, although this is what was concluded from them. They showed only that people did not necessarily change their minds because of direct media exposure. The media – as the studies empirically confirmed – raised interest, fixed opinions, and, crucially, informed the electorate. Most of what people knew about campaigns they had learnt from the media.

### *Understanding and information*

Indeed during this same period, another approach to studying the effect of the media, that of experimental psychology, began to develop a rather different model of media influence from that of the surveys. ‘The power of the media to persuade, at least where there is a democratic

controversy,' wrote Poole, 'is very much less than is usually assessed, but their power to inform is enormous.' A series of psychological experiments carried out by Hovland during the 1940s examined the effects of films designed to inform American soldiers about the war in Europe. The films had little effect on 'morale' or 'motivation to serve'. Yet after they had seen the films the men talked significantly more about what was happening in Europe, and this knowledge persisted for weeks. 'The hammerlike blows of frenzied oratory', Hovland concluded, 'may produce acquiescence and later recrimination: autonomous decisions made under the cumulative pressure of facts do not exact this price.' The theory which lay behind this 'propaganda of facts', he points out, 'is not far removed from the logic of progressive education'.

These experiments also showed that people were particularly vulnerable to persuasion about subjects of which they had no direct experience. Moreover, the willingness of the public to believe what it is told is precisely related to the degree of trust it has in the source of the message. Since few people have firsthand experience of politics, and broadcasting is regarded as an especially authoritative source, these findings would suggest that the effects of the media on political opinion may be particularly strong.

Hovland later argued that the distinction drawn between his experimental results and those of survey research was misleading. His work showed that between one-third and one-half of the people he tested 'actually changed their views'. Yet the surveys had concluded that communications had little effect on attitudes. Hovland argued that some of these differences could be explained because laboratory studies examined immediate responses to media messages, while the surveys were typically conducted long after exposure. But also, he argued, the laboratory studies 'deliberately try to find some types of issue susceptible to change', while surveys attempted to assess the impact of the media on 'socially significant attitudes which are deeply rooted in prior experience and involving much personal commitment'.<sup>8</sup> That is to say, the surveys had investigated those attitudes least likely to be altered in the short term.

### *The active audience*

Studies of the purposes for which members of the audience use the media, and the gratification they get from this use, have also emphasized that public response is varied and not homogeneous. Thus McQuail *et al.* have argued that people use the media for diversion (including escape from routine and unpleasant problems); for developing personal relationships (including substitute companionship); for confirming their personal identity; and for keeping themselves informed. It is implied that if people use the media to satisfy different needs they will also interpret and use the same media message in many different

ways. Nevertheless, in the case of political communications, the most frequently expressed use of the media is that of surveillance, or using the media to acquire information.

Indeed the findings of the ‘uses and gratifications’ research are not incompatible with a stronger interpretation of the role of the media. Given the differences in education, work, and leisure opportunities it would be surprising if the audience response to the media was unitary. The problem is rather to integrate evidence about the differences in the quantity of people’s media exposure; about variations in popular interpretations of the media; and about differences in the extent of recall, with other evidence about social divisions. Thus Katz asks, ‘What needs, if any, are created by routine work on an assembly line and which forms of exposure will satisfy them?’ It is also possible to ask whether the use of the media reinforces or ameliorates social differences. In either case, an explanation of variety in media use is an important part of any more adequate explanation of the power of broadcasting and the press.

### **Pluralism: the effects of what the audience knows**

More recently attempts have been made to understand the effects of the media on knowledge as well as on opinion. Survey research had apparently shown that the media had little effect on attitudes; new evidence seems to show, by contrast, a dramatic impact on the range and depth of perceptions.

### *Changes in politics*

Underlying these new approaches – and perhaps not unrelated to them – were changes in political behaviour. ‘Party allegiance’, wrote Blumler, ‘which was once the rock of Gibraltar of the reinforcement doctrine of political communications effects has increasingly become its shifting sands.’ The class basis of party support was apparently eroding in all the western democracies.

Consequently as the consistent voter became more rare, the nature of the ‘floating’ volatile voter changed. Previous research had shown floating voters to be an ignorant and apathetic section of the electorate. Recent research provides a different profile: undecided voters are seen, typically, as increasingly likely to be better informed than the majority.

Indeed if class continues to become a less accurate predictor of voting decisions, the media will play a more important role in political choice. By the 1980s television had become the dominating source of election information for nearly all voters. Yet this is the medium which might be expected to have the greatest effect on long-term political allegiances. For as class and social networks become less important as the determining source of political reinforcement, it has been suggested that voters will rely more heavily on information to make up their minds.

Views may become more strongly held because they are reinforced by the media. However views may also wither and die because they receive no public reinforcement. Martin Harrop argues that this negative power of the media – selectively to neglect some ideas – is a critical, and little recognized media effect.<sup>9</sup>

Thus the media have an authoritative relationship with their audience. This is one of dependence and trust and it provides the media with a potentially independent power base in society and one that may have become more powerful recently.

### *Agenda setting*

In addition attempts have been made to discover the effect of the media in determining priorities: how far press, radio, and television coverage could change a sense of which events were more important. On the basis of a study of the emergence of issues during an American presidential campaign, Becker and McCombs argued that such an influence was major, but gradual. There was a distinction, however, between the effects of the press and television. With newspaper influence there was a delayed reaction. ‘The newspaper agenda of political issues in June is a predictor of voters’ agendas in October,’ they claimed. With television the impact was last minute, but immediate. By the end of the campaign, television had become the most important determinant of voters’ ideas.

The media’s ordering of priorities particularly influenced voters without strong views. Yet television’s coverage of politics has now penetrated sections of the electorate who previously were little affected by political communication because they were uninterested. Consequently the agenda setting by the media seems to be becoming more significant to a larger proportion of the electorate.

The media’s agenda of issues may be quite different from that of the political parties. As Seymour-Ure has shown, media coverage made a speech on immigration delivered by Enoch Powell to a small audience in a church hall familiar to 86 per cent of the population two days later. Before the speech only 6 per cent of a Gallup Poll sample thought immigration an issue of national importance; afterwards 27 per cent thought it was important, and nearly 70 per cent of the public believed that the government would have to take ‘a harder line’. In effect, Seymour-Ure writes, Powell had ‘won himself a national constituency, a platform in the media from which to state his views on most subjects with the certainty of having an audience’.

Neither Powell, nor the media, created the race issue in Britain. Nevertheless, argues Seymour-Ure, the publicity surrounding his speech at a crucial moment (during the debate on the controversial Race Relations Bill) pushed immigration to the front of the political stage, a position it has kept ever since.

The political effects of the media on public opinion are complex, and need to be examined in their historical context. The media may exert great influence over one group, but have little

impact on the other members of a society. Thus in many recent revolutions, the press and writing – despite close censorship – has been crucial in establishing cultures of opposition to authoritarian regimes amongst the educated classes. This was an essential condition of the success of the liberal revolution in Portugal in 1974. Yet, there, after the revolution, a dramatic change in the political direction of the media (from right to left), between the first and second democratic elections, had no effect on voting behaviour at all.<sup>10</sup> Similar patterns seem to be developing after the Eastern European revolutions of the late 1980s.

The first studies of the effects of the press and broadcasting had undermined earlier assumptions about the power of the media, suggesting that audiences were, after all, free. Anybody, it seemed, could make almost any-thing out of any message. Yet a re-examination of the evidence has thrown doubts on this view. It has been suggested that the media may not persuade the public directly; nevertheless they affect what people know, and what they think is important.

### **Media organizations**

Of course, research into public responses to news and information is not the only way of considering the political role of the mass media. Another approach is to look at how news is produced: the processes of news-gathering, sifting, and editing, and the administration of news and entertainment organizations. The virtue of this method is that it helps us to understand what pressures shape the commodity presented to the public. Its limitation is that in considering how rival interests balance one another, there has been a tendency to ignore the broader problem of those important but powerless interests which have no influence at all.

### *Making news*

News rooms are always under pressure: the unexpected is always about to happen, the scoop is only a telephone call away. This is the professional self-image. However, for journalists (as for politicians, doctors, and firemen) crises that are frequent enough develop a pattern: the unexpected becomes the predictable.

Journalists solve these pressures by developing a set of rules. Tuchman argues that ‘the routinely non-routine is constituted in practical tasks: in work’. Tuchman, however, also suggests that objectivity is little more than a protective ‘strategic ritual’, a set of conventions about the origins and presentation of facts that allows journalists to defend their selection of newsworthy events and interpretations. In an extreme form, Tuchman’s definition of news precludes any distinction between relatively good or bad journalistic practices. Nevertheless, this interpretation highlights the way in which accuracy is by no means the same thing as objectivity.

The events that are honoured by being made news are those that are easy to obtain. They are by no means necessarily the most significant events which have occurred. In order to get made into news, events have to happen in places convenient for the newsgathering agencies, to be of a recognized and acceptable kind, come from a reliable and predictable source, and fit into journalists' framework of news values. These rules and habits have become worldwide and, as Golding and Elliot argue, 'News changes very little when the individuals that produce it are changed.' Even the international flow of news is determined not by the importance of events but by the organization of the news-processing industries.

The popular image of journalists (elaborated in many movies) as intrepid hunters after hidden truths is hardly realistic. Specialist reporters in particular are closely involved with, and indeed dependent upon, their sources. Thus crime reporters identify with the police, defence correspondents with the services, and industrial relations experts with the trade unions.<sup>11</sup> But, in addition, journalists, who are better seen as bureaucrats than as buccaneers, begin their work from a stock of plausible, well-defined, and largely unconscious assumptions. Part of their job is to translate untidy reality into neat stories with beginnings, middles, and denouements.

The values which inform the selection of news items usually serve to reinforce conventional opinions and established authority. At the same time, a process of simplification filters out the disturbing or the unexpected. The need of the media to secure instant attention creates a strong prejudice in favour of familiar stories and themes, and a slowness of response when reality breaks the conventions.

### *Pseudo-events*

Many items of news are not 'events' at all, that is in the sense of occurrences in the real world which take place independently of the media. An important development alongside the mass media has been the growth of organizations, professions, and skills aimed at manipulating the media.

In a pioneering study (*Public Relations and American Democracy*, 1951) J. A. R. Pimlott reviewed attempts to control news and public opinion in the USA. Prompted by his own experience as a civil servant closely involved with the implementation of Labour's post-war programme in Britain, he was concerned with the use of public relations to win support for central planning and social reform – in particular the New Deal. He also considered the dangers which public relations presented. The book takes issue with the '*laissez-faire* school' argument that free competition ensures a fair hearing for both sides of every major issue. In many cases, the author pointed out, it is 'nobody's business to put the other side'. In the early 1930s American unions had complained that because of inadequate resources, they were unable to compete with the publicity of employers. Pimlott felt that there was some justice in



the trade union case during the Depression, that ‘more than ever before strikes are being won or lost in the newspapers’. His conclusions were pessimistic. It was impossible to control the growth of public relations by government intervention. Nevertheless, newspapers could help ‘by transferring some of the energy which they devote to attacks upon government propaganda to attacking the misuse of public relations by private industry’.

Indeed the notion that ‘events’ compete for attention in the press and broadcasting is misleading. Often the media are desperately anxious to secure enough content (of the kind they want) to fill their space or time.

In this way, much of what is perceived as ‘news’ is little more than free advertising. ‘Not for nothing does the trainee journalist have to sit as part of his qualifying exams a test in how to write a press handout,’ writes McBarnett. The local press is particularly vulnerable to pre-digested news. Much of what appears as ‘political news’ is in fact written by councillors, candidates, and MPs. The same process also determines much of what appears nationally, leading to what Boorstin has called ‘pseudo-events’ – activities whose only real purpose is to secure and control media coverage.

### *Entertainment*

What is entertainment? All media industries compete to create it. Even with news and documentaries, the pressure to be ‘entertaining’ – to hold audiences by being immediately accessible and stimulating – overrides other considerations. A high proportion of media content has no other aim but to amuse, flatter, excite, mystify, or titillate the public and so keep its attention.

Thus Michael Tracey has argued that the most prominent anxiety of producers of political television was not the sensitivity of their relationships with the political élite, but rather the development of an entertainment formula. Discussion programmes were composed as much for dramatic excitement as for political balance. ‘Did you see her on women’s lib?’ he quotes a producer enquiring. ‘Marvellous woman. Never stops talking. Liable to throw something.’

Yet just as little ‘serious’ material is presented without a sugar coating, so too there is nothing – or almost nothing – that can be deemed ‘pure’ entertainment. Soap opera, comedy, variety, and pop may not be intended to have any effect on the views of their audiences. But, it can be argued, there is scarcely a joke or a lyric that does not reflect a social attitude, and one with political consequences.

Some writers have suggested that entertainment encourages political passivity. Gitlin has argued that it often ‘provides a legitimization of depoliticized forms of deviance, usually ethnic or sexual, and a delegitimation of the dangerous, the out of bounds, the violent’.<sup>12</sup> The resolution of social problems typically presented in fictional programmes may influence how they come to be seen in the real world.

It is not only the content of the media which may have implications for attitudes but also the form of programmes. Dyer has argued, in his discussion of light entertainment, that the way in which stars are presented, pictures shot, and the studio audience used, may all affect the meaning communicated by programmes. In so far as 'leisure' is seen by programme-makers as being opposed to work, then entertainment 'has to do something about the reality of work, it has to have an attitude towards it'.

### *Audiences*

It is often argued that the mass media 'reflect' society because they are obliged to please their audiences. Yet many researchers have commented on the apparent remoteness of producers from their potential viewers. 'It is not so much that people don't know what the audience wants,' Alvarado and Buscombe write, 'as that in the actual process of production people were working more to please themselves.'

However, while writers on political broadcasting have seen this ignorance of the audience as a problem – 'the vital missing link', as Tracey calls it – writers on creative and fictional broadcasting have seen it as a safeguard. 'A model of popular television', write Alvarado and Buscombe, 'which sees it either as a cynical manipulation, or a straightforward identity of tastes between producers and audience, would be an over-simplification.'

The demands of the audience do not, then, exert any direct pressure on producers. Producers have only a vague image of those whom watch their programmes. Yet they have a clear, if unconscious, notion of whom they are actually addressing: well-informed, critical, professional people like themselves.

### *Institutional pluralists*

One argument has been that television in particular is not so much a player in the political game as the referee: setting the rules and arbitrating between contending forces.

This view of the political role of the media has been expressed most clearly by Anthony Smith. 'Television', he argues,

has become the Theatre of Politics in both senses of the term. Like the theatre of classical times its structures combine into a memory system. Its disciplines incorporate the moral norms of politics as these apply at a given moment of history.

Thus the nature of the rules and their application reflect the politics of the time. The decision about whether to interview a terrorist on television, or the choice of 'controversial' topics for

discussion, precisely indicates the political mood as it is perceived by producers and editors. Changes in the relationship between ‘current affairs’, ‘comment’, and ‘news’, or what is seen as ‘hard fact’ determine the manner in which information is presented to the public. In this way the limits of the permissible, the acceptable, and the appropriate constitute a series of snapshots of prevailing attitudes.

These pressures, however, are always seen by these writers as emerging from a free market of influence. Reviewing research into media organization, Blumler has argued that ‘Researchers may be near the heart of competition through communication that is waged in a democratic pluralist society.’ Burns has suggested that the politics of broadcasting are the politics of accommodation, while Smith, in his book *The Shadow in the Cave*, argued that ‘If broadcasting is to be used as a tool for the intelligent exchange of cultural products, political information and controversial disquisition, it needs to be left flexible and left alone.’

Yet ‘negotiation’ and ‘amplification’ are inadequate metaphors for a process in which so much power has come to be invested in the message carrier itself. Hirsch and Gordon have argued that commercial pressure has limited the range of opinion expressed in the quality press. ‘The picture we suggest of the quality press is a band of opinion occupying the broad centre of British politics from about half way into the moderate left through to the edges of the extreme right.’ But broadcasting has usurped the role of the popular press as a supplier of political information to the mass audience, while preserving the same ‘consensus band’ of opinion as the quality newspapers. Thus the audience of BBC or ITV news includes most readers of the *Mirror* and the *People*: but these programmes’ political values (not just their concern with information) are closer to those of *The Times* and the *Observer*.

That the media order events, and discriminate between them, is not in itself evidence of their systematic effect on public understanding. But while some groups can bring powerful pressures to bear on the work that the media do, others can bring none. The market for information is no more free than any other.

### **The new determinists: class and market**

Another view of the press and broadcasting is that they reinforce and legitimize the present structure. The media, it is argued, distract public attention from real problems by manufacturing events and inflating trivial issues. However, the press and broadcasting, the new British cultural critics have suggested, do not merely express the interests of the dominant class. This is not only because this class does not always have one simple unitary interest, but also because the media at times reflect other interpretations of society.

However, it should be noted that these writers – many of whom have been associated with the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at Birmingham – rarely question the concepts of ‘lived experience’, culture, struggle, resistance, or social control in their work. These ideas

are accepted as self-evident and unproblematic, and used as the basis for explaining other phenomena. This inadequacy limits the work of these writers.<sup>13</sup>

### *Ideology*

Ideology, writes Stuart Hall, 'entails the proposition that ideas are not self-sufficient, that their roots lie elsewhere'. Indeed while the audience for the media contains most members of society, only a few groups have any control over what the media produce. Hall concludes that they 'reproduce the definition of the powerful, without being in a simple sense in their pay'.

Hall argues that the media do not simply trick their audience: to some extent they must meet its needs. The independence of the media is at times quite genuine. For instance Hall suggests that broadcasting organizations have 'a wide measure of autonomy in their programming'.<sup>14</sup> However, this independence, though not a device, is actually serving a highly sophisticated function within a complex system. Precisely because the media produce material which is good, impartial, and serious, they are accorded a high degree of respect and authority. Since, in practice, the ethic of the press and television is closely associated with a homogeneous establishment this provides a vital support for the existing order. In this way, the apparent autonomy of organizations like the BBC 'veils and mystifies the structure of constraints'. Independence, Hall argues, is not 'a mere cover, it is central to the way power and ideology are mediated in societies like ours'. Thus we seem to have a more sophisticated instance of 'false consciousness'. The public are bribed with good radio, television, and newspapers into an acceptance of the biased, the misleading, and the status quo.

Hall emphasizes that the media change the world. They do not passively reflect class interests that have already been well developed. The media often articulate interests not previously expressed. That they do so is not because of the intentions of those who produce them. Rather it is a consequence of the situation and function of the press and broadcasting. The media, Hall suggests in a 1977 essay, help us 'not simply to *know more* about "the world", but to make sense of it'.

The mass media are not, according to this approach, crude agents of propaganda. They organize public understanding. However, the overall interpretations they provide in the long run are those which are most preferred by, and least challenging to, those with economic power.

### *Class, culture, and experience*

Part of this approach to the power of the media has been a concern with the way in which different classes experience their position. The work of E. P. Thompson and that of Raymond Williams has been an important influence here. Both of these writers have been concerned

with the nineteenth-century reaction to industrialization (although this has often been mistaken for a reaction to capitalism). Thus Thompson has written about working-class movements which opposed industrial developments, and Williams has examined the social criticism implied in the aesthetic reaction to industrialization of the Romantic movement. Barnett has argued that Williams puts too much faith in the political force of cultural opposition. 'Where economic strategies rely upon the spontaneous momentum of industrial struggles to accomplish the overthrow of capitalism,' he suggests, 'Williams's book contains a cultural argument that is logically similar.'<sup>15</sup> In this way the independence of working-class culture has come to be seen not only as a source of opposition to capitalism, but also as leading to a socialist rejection of it.

This tradition has led the cultural critics to focus on working-class response to, and use of, the media. Thus Finn and Grant argue that people are 'not merely on "the receiving end" of their objective class position'. Classes take over, interpret, and use ideologies which are presented to them: they make them their own. This is particularly true of the ideas transmitted by the media.

According to this view, the working class is imprisoned by an ideology it often rejects. Many workers are not taken in by the view of society handed down to them. This can be seen from 'oppositional' behaviour which is generally not overtly political. Thus Willis has considered the division in a boys' comprehensive between those who are subservient to the imposed system and take exams, and those who regard the examination system as a confidence trick that will not help them. Willis argues that the second group of disrespectful layabouts actually have a better understanding of the world and their place in it. He suggests that 'Oppressed, subordinate and minority groups can have a hand in constructing their own vibrant cultures and are not merely dupes.'

Yet the relationship between working-class culture and political action is hardly inevitable. The relationship between lifestyle and class is also more difficult to explain than these writers have implied. In addition, those who have written about the sociology of art, literature, or film have found no simple correlation between the social origins of artists, writers, and film-makers and the political implications of their work. Indeed, as Garnham has pointed out, just because cultural goods are made within the capitalist system it 'does not follow that these commodities will necessarily support the dominant ideology'. This is not to argue that there is no relationship between class, cultural products, and experience; only that a direct relationship cannot be taken for granted. At the same time, even if it is true that experience of the media has become an intrinsic part of working-class culture, it cannot therefore be automatically assumed to be good.

### *The market*

The pluralists largely ignore market pressures. The new determinist writers, in contrast, give them a crucial role. However, the determinist analysis of working-class culture leads to a

contradiction. Goods – including the products of the media industries – are produced, it is argued, not to meet needs but to earn profits. Hence the goods are often worthless or inappropriate in themselves. However, workers are not necessarily enslaved by the distortions of the market. By appropriating what the system throws up, the working class preserves its cultural autonomy. Thus claims Willis, ‘from the rubbish available within a preconstituted market’, working-class groups ‘generate viable cultures, and through their work on received commodities actually formulate a living and lived out concretized critique’.

The work of Willis, Hebdige, and others provides an analysis of particular groups within the working class. Yet on the one hand, any attempt to generalize these conclusions to ‘working-class culture’ has to be treated with caution because of the narrow base of the research; on the other, the new critics seem to want to have their cake and eat it. Is television a subtle form of exploitation, the more sinister for being good? Is it ‘rubbish available within a preconstituted market’, to use Willis’s phrase for consumer goods in general? If the former, then it is hard to see how – or why – the working class should adopt oppositional ‘concretized critiques’ of it in their lifestyles. If the latter, and working-class culture manages to incorporate or appropriate the media product and remain ‘viable’ and ‘lived out’, then how thorough is the exploitation?

Pop music produces an interesting example. Is rock ‘n’ roll an expression of youth culture? Or is it a prime instance of capital discovering a new market and exploiting it? Few people would want to say that rock is intrinsically bad, or that it is not an important element in working-class life. No industry is more brazenly oriented towards quick, easy profits; in few are market pressures more immediate. Yet it is hard to sustain the argument that rock is handed down ‘rubbish’.

Pop or rock fans are hardly an oppositional body taken *en masse*. As Frith points out, they are well aware that the product they buy is made and sold primarily to make profits. The reality is that rock is not simply a market-oriented concoction of the recording studios of Decca or EMI. Nor is it authentic folk music living an independent life in the community. Nor, for that matter, is it a distortion of a musical tradition plucked out of its native environment. Rather it is the product of a complex set of relationships in which music, fans, the media, profit takers, and distribution systems all play a part.

### *News values and power*

The new cultural critics are most interesting when they deal with the content of the media and its relationships to power. *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State, and Law and Order* by Hall *et al.*, for example, both describes the career of a category of news story, cases of ‘mugging’, and also analyses its influence on the judiciary, the police, and the public.

The authors show how the media created anxiety by giving a new name to an old offence. This in turn precipitated an aggressive sentencing policy which was seen as a necessary response to an earlier mistakenly 'soft' attitude towards offenders. Yet as Hall and others show, not only had the rate of increase in crimes of violence actually declined in the period before the emergence of the mugging story, but also far from becoming more lenient, sentences had steadily become longer. The curious inversion of facts, the authors argue, can be explained only in terms of the media's most general function of reworking ideology and maintaining the status quo.

The new cultural critics emphasize that their explanation of this process does not imply any deliberate conspiracy. 'Within its limits', Hall has written, broadcasting, for example, 'shows little evidence of intentional bias, but the trouble is the matter of unwitting bias'. Rather the coincidence of interests between the media and those with economic power is secured by professional and organizational values, and a shared perspective of the way in which society is organized. Thus Murdoch, writing about the reporting of an anti-Vietnam rally in 1968, argued that 'despite this element of autonomy, the basic definition of the situation which underlies the news reporting of political events very largely coincides with the definitions provided by the legitimate power holders'.

### *Social control*

Thus the media are seen by the determinists as one powerful agency of social control – as a means of inhibiting opposition to the social order. In a similar argument, Bourdieu has described the function of the education system, which he sees as justifying the established order, by

using the overt connection between qualifications and jobs as a smokescreen for the connection – which it records surreptitiously under the cover of a formal equality – between the qualifications people obtain and the cultural capital they have inherited – in other words through the legitimation it confers on the framework of this form of heritage.

Differences in the use of the media, the distribution of tastes and preferences, are thus more than a mere expression of class. They are a vital means of making people accept different class opportunities, and those interpretations of events which are the least challenging to existing social arrangements.

Indeed in the analysis of the cultural critics, the media perform a special role in addition: they maintain and repair consensus as the nature of the status quo changes. Thus the crime of 'mugging', launched and amplified by the press, did not emerge accidentally. Rather it arose

‘in the middle of a general moral panic about the rising rate of crime. Far from triggering into existence what did not previously exist, it clearly focuses what is widespread and free floating.’

The concept of social control seems to imply an imminent crisis, one that will eventually erupt but which is at present controlled. The emergence of the ‘mugging’ story is therefore interpreted merely as a symptom of a more fundamental crisis, one in which there has been a collapse in the willingness of the public to accept the authority of the state. The individual discrete ‘moral panics’ of the 1960s are seen as having been superseded by a more general breakdown. The only rationale, it is argued, for

entrusting the management of the corporate capitalist state to a social democracy is either (1) that in a tight squeeze it can better win the collaboration of the working-class organization for the state, or (2) that if there is going to be a crisis Labour might as well have it!

In this way there is a danger that social structure is anthropomorphized: it becomes an active agent in pursuit of its own persistence.

However, despite the limitations of the concepts of social control, the determinist explanation of the role of the media is revealing. The media do not merely express the interests of the ruling class, rather they have an independent function in ordering the world. The media do not merely ‘reflect’ social reality: they increasingly help to make it.

## **Conclusion**

As we have seen, the pluralist analysis of the effects of the media contains an apparent contradiction. On the one hand, it seems to show that the media do have an influence, both on what people know and on the political system. On the other hand it seems to suggest that, so far from having an independent power, the media merely reflect the balance of forces within society. Thus the pluralists are left saying that the press and broadcasting function as an ideological market-place, a focus for competing pressures without an impact of their own. At the same time in taking a favourable view of ‘pluralist’ balance, this position tends to ignore the extent to which the weaker and unorganized groups are excluded from the process altogether.

Is the determinist approach any better? The cultural critics share the pluralists’ view that the media have a key political role, stressing the way in which press and broadcasting shape public understanding. They differ from the pluralists in their preoccupation with the real or supposed role of the media as an instrument of class domination.



Thus the determinists have pointed to a major weakness in the pluralist case: the model of a freely competitive market-place of ideas breaks down because some groups are unable to compete. At the same time the empirical evidence of the pluralists gives powerful backing to the determinists' conviction that the media exert an important and uncontrolled influence. Yet the determinist explanation in terms of class manipulation and exploitation is too mechanistic, obscuring a series of complex relationships which have yet to be explained.

### Notes

- 1 H. Arendt, *The Burden of Our Time* (London, Secker & Warburg, 1950), p. 331.
- 2 M. Horkheimer, *The Eclipse of Reason* (London, Oxford University Press, 1947), p. 135.
- 3 H. D. Lasswell, 'The garrison state', *American Journal of Sociology*, 46 (1941), p. 462.
- 4 This 'strong' interpretation they share with F. Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom* (London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1944). He indicts socialism, they blame fascism.
- 5 H. Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, vol. 2, *Thinking* (London, Secker & Warburg, 1978), p. 93.
- 6 E. Katz and P. Lazarsfeld, *Personal Influence: The Part Played by People in the Flow of Mass Communication* (New York, Free Press, 1955).
- 7 P. Becker and M. McCombs point this out in 'The development of political cognition' in S. H. Chaffee (ed.), *Political Communication: Issues and Strategies* (Beverly Hills, CA, Sage, 1975).
- 8 C. I. Hovland, 'Reconciling conflicting results derived from experimental and survey studies of attitude change', *American Psychologist*, 14 (1959), p. 11.
- 9 M. Harrop and A. Sharp, *Can Labour Win?* (Harlow, Fabian Research Bureau/ Longman, 1989).
- 10 For a further development of this case, and a consideration of its more general implications, see J. Seaton and B. Pimlott, 'The role of the media in the Portuguese revolution' in A. Smith (ed.), *Newspapers and Democracy: International Essays in a Changing Medium* (Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 1980); J. Seaton and B. Pimlott, 'Political power and the Portuguese media' in L. Graham and D. Wheeler (eds), *In Search of Modern Portugal: The Revolution and its Consequences* (Wisconsin, University of Wisconsin Press, 1983); B. Pimlott and J. Seaton, 'The Portuguese media in transition' in K. Maxwell (ed.), *The Press and the Rebirth of Iberian Democracy* (Westwood, CT, Greenwood, 1983).
- 11 See J. Seaton, 'Trade unions and the media' in B. Pimlott and C. Cook (eds), *Trade Unions in British Politics* (Harlow, Longman, 1983).
- 12 T. Gitlin, 'Prime time ideology: the hegemonic process in television entertainment', *Social Problems*, 26, 3 (1979), p. 111.
- 13 James Curran does not share some of Jean Seaton's reservations about the writers discussed in this part of the chapter.
- 14 S. Hall, 'The external/internal dialectic on broadcasting', *4th Symposium on British Broadcasting Policy* (February 1972).
- 15 A. Barnett in R. Williams (ed.), *Politics and Letters: Interviews with the New Left Review* (London, New Left Books, 1979), p. 98.

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## *The liberal theory of press freedom*

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According to classical liberal theory, the freedom of the press is rooted in the freedom to publish in the free market. This ensures that the press reflects a wide range of opinions and interests in society. If a viewpoint is not expressed in the press, this is only because it lacks a sufficient following to sustain it in the market-place. As the heroine puts it in Tom Stoppard's play, *Night and Day*, 'The *Flat Earth News* is free to sell a million copies. What it lacks is the ability to find a million people with four pence and a conviction that the earth is flat. Freedom is neutral.'

This neutrality of the market makes the press a representative voice of the people. 'The broad shape and nature of the press', argues John Whale, 'is ultimately determined by no one but its readers.' This is because newspapers and magazines must respond to their readers if they are to stay in business in a competitive market.

Some liberal theorists liken the operation of the market to the processes of political representation. Newspapers, they contend, must submit to the equivalent of an election every time they go on sale whereas politicians seek election only at infrequent intervals. The press should thus be viewed as an institution that represents the public and is uniquely accountable to it.

There are three key ways in which the press serves democracy. It informs the electorate, oversees government, and articulates public opinion. This liberal trinity is sometimes reworked into an integrated model, as in the claim that the press acts as a two-way channel of information and influence between governed and government. Some liberal accounts also portray the press as fulfilling other supplementary roles such as articulating the agreed aims and values of society, helping society to adapt and change, and protecting members of the public from wrongdoing or exploitation.

Concealed beneath these folds of argument, often well out of sight, is a contentious assumption. Liberals tacitly hold that press freedom is a property right exercised by publishers on behalf of society. Thus, it is assumed that publishers have the right to personally direct their newspapers, or delegate authority, as they see fit. What they do is consistent,

ultimately, with the public interest since their actions are regulated by market processes. These processes ensure, in liberal theory, that the press is free, diverse, and representative.

Radical critics generally attack this argument on the grounds that it masks the privileged position of capital in the seemingly open contest of the free market.<sup>1</sup> Instead of giving rise to a press that serves equally all members of society, it tends to result in newspapers that represent the world in ways consonant with the interests of dominant groups.

However, these objections usually come from critics of the liberal tradition. More significant in some ways are the criticisms which come out of the liberal tradition, and which are articulated by continuing upholders of that tradition. These criticisms have become increasingly persistent, and can come close to arguing that the liberal theory of the press is based on a myth.

The nature of these criticisms and misgivings will be illustrated by comparing the reports of three successive Royal Commissions on the press, published in 1949, 1962, and 1977. The last two reports represent staging posts in a progressive process of disenchantment with traditional conceptions of press freedom.

### **Freedom to publish**

‘Free enterprise’, declared the first Royal Commission on the Press, ‘is a prerequisite of a free press.’ Underlying this belief was a relatively untroubled conviction that the unrestricted freedom to publish produces a diverse and representative press. The Commission expected to find that ‘the press as a whole gives an opportunity for all important points of view to be effectively presented in terms of the varying standards of taste, political opinion, and education among the principal groups of the population’. Wartime economic controls were blamed for preventing new publications from springing up to meet changes in public demand. Anticipating the time when these controls would be removed, the Commission rejected dividend control because it might inhibit the creativity of the market. It also dismissed proposals for assisting the launch of new papers on the grounds that they were unnecessary.

The 1977 Commission was forced to make a different assessment of the market. As the Commission put it bluntly, ‘Anyone is free to start a daily national newspaper, but few can afford even to contemplate the prospect.’ It also noted that the national press was overwhelmingly right wing and manifestly unrepresentative. Indeed, ‘in February 1974 . . . the share of newspaper (national daily) circulation held by papers supporting the Conservative Party was 71% greater than Conservative votes as a percentage of the votes cast.’

High entry costs were found to curtail the freedom to publish in other sectors of the press. Even establishing a new local evening paper in a town with no direct competition would cost in 1977, according to the Commission, between £2 million and £3 million. The cost of

launching a new magazine in the main consumer sectors was also found to be high. As for new paid-for weeklies, there are 'not many places left with the right conditions to provide a permanent market'.

The assumption that 'anyone' is free to start a new paper has been an illusion ever since the industrialization of the press. That it is an illusion was exposed in unsparing detail by the last Commission. This part of its report thus dislodged a key foundation stone sustaining the traditional theory of press freedom.

### **Proprietors and chain ownership**

The 1949 Commission argued that proprietors should be free to conduct their publications as they wished. This was justified partly on the grounds that proprietors had the right to safeguard their financial investments in a high-risk industry. It was also assumed that their freedom underpinned the diversity of the press.

Underlying the Commission's approach was the assumption that chain ownership would not develop into a major problem. 'There is no reason to expect', declared the Commission,

that the aggressive expansion of chain undertakings [in the daily and Sunday press] which characterised the early period will be resumed. Neither in the local nor in the periodical press nor in the news agencies do we expect a significant trend towards further concentration of ownership.

The 1962 Commission was obliged to revise this assessment. It found that the share of circulation controlled by the major chains had 'substantially increased' in all parts of the press. The leading three proprietors' share of the national daily press had soared to 89 per cent. There were, it added, 'spectacular movements towards concentration of ownership' in the periodical press. Only amongst local weeklies was concentration 'negligible'.

In 1977 the third Commission was forced to revise even this conclusion. The greatest acceleration of chain ownership had occurred, it reported unhappily, in the local weekly press. Furthermore, new acquisitions had resulted in the same three proprietors dominating both the national daily and Sunday markets unlike before.<sup>2</sup> The Commission also highlighted a phenomenon which had previously received little attention – the emergence of subregional monopolies in which all 'competing' local morning, evening, and weekly papers were owned by the same group.

These changes in the press prompted a reassessment. Whereas the first two Commissions had taken for granted the right of proprietors to determine editorial policy, the third Commission talked of the need to 'protect editors and journalists from owners'. The exercise of proprietorial power no longer appeared legitimate on the grounds accepted by its

predecessors – that of guaranteeing the diversity of the press. Indeed at a time when just three men controlled over half of total daily and Sunday newspaper sales in Britain, proprietorial authority was tacitly recognized to threaten editorial diversity.

### **Proprietorship of the fourth estate**

This shift of attitude towards proprietorial authority was also influenced by changes in the character of press ownership. The first Commission had advanced as a subsidiary justification for proprietorship the claim that it safeguarded the autonomy and integrity of the press. ‘It is undoubtedly a great merit of the British press’, declared the Commission, ‘that it is completely independent of outside financial interests and that its policy is the policy of those who own and control it.’ The Commission thus invoked the classical liberal view of the press as an independent fourth estate, uncompromised by vested interests.

But during the take-over boom of the late 1960s and 1970s most of the British press was bought up by or diversified into interests outside publishing. By 1977, all but one of the leading publishing groups in both Fleet Street and the regional press were part of larger conglomerates with holdings in fields as diverse as North Sea oil, transport, mining, construction, engineering, finance, and the leisure industries. ‘Rather than saying that the press has other business interests,’ the last Commission concluded unhappily, ‘it would be truer to argue that the press has become a subsidiary of other industries.’

This clearly undermined the case for proprietorial control as a guarantee of the press’s financial integrity to which the 1949 Commission had paid such a fulsome and, in retrospect, embarrassing tribute. It also cast in a new light its contention, cited earlier, that proprietors had the right to protect their economic interests. If investigative journalism exposes wrongdoing by a parent or sister company, have dominant shareholders the right to suppress it? Can the freedom of the press be equated with the freedom of big business to promote its welfare?<sup>3</sup> These were questions which clearly troubled the 1977 Commission, and partly explains why it was much less enthusiastic about ‘the rights’ of proprietors than its predecessors.

### **Competition, consumer choice, and new technology**

The first Commission attached great importance to the role of competition in making the press accountable. Due to competitive pressures, argued the Commission, ‘whatever a paper’s purpose and however it is owned, it cannot escape the necessity of offering the public what some at least of the public will buy’.

Although the Commission was troubled by the large number of newspaper closures during the inter-war period, it took comfort in the belief that this had been only a temporary

phenomenon caused mainly by extravagance and lack of adaptability. 'In the provincial press as a whole,' it concluded, 'there is nothing approaching monopoly and we can see no strong tendency towards monopoly.'

The Commission's optimism was confounded by events. The total number of newspaper titles continued to decline (see Table 6). The cities in the UK with a choice of directly competing local morning or evening papers were reduced by 1974 to only London, Edinburgh, and Belfast (see Table 7). In 1975 only 18 per cent of towns with a local paper had a choice of weeklies under separate ownership, a proportion that was little over half of what it had been in 1961. In short, competition – the *deus ex machina* of liberal theory which makes the consumer 'sovereign' and proprietors accountable – had been seriously eroded in much of the regional press.

The last Commission found some solace in the emergence of freesheets, a development which has become even more pronounced since it reported. However, the rise of freesheets has caused a further reduction in the number of paid-for weeklies (see Table 6). Due to their dependent relationship to advertisers, freesheets do not constitute an important independent voice. Ironically many of them are now also published by the major chains. In 1988 the five largest publishers of freesheets were responsible between them for 338 free newspapers: the same publishers also controlled a further 243 paid-for papers.

Table 6 *The number of newspaper titles, 1921–88*

	1921	1937	1948	1961	1976	1988	Percentage reduction 1921–88
							%
<i>National press</i>							
National daily	14	11	11	10	9	12	14
National Sunday	14	10	10	8	7	9	36
<i>Regional/local press</i>							
Morning	41	27	27	22	20	18	66
Evening	93	83	80	77	79	74	20
Sunday	7	7	6	5	6	8	(14)
Weekly and bi-weekly	1,485	1,303	1,307	1,219	1,072	801	66
Freesheets	–	–	–	–	185 <sup>a</sup>	896 <sup>b</sup>	–
Total <sup>c</sup>	1,654	1,441	1,441	1,341	1,193	922	44

Sources: *Royal Commission on the Press 1947–9 Report*, Appendix 2, Tables 2–3; *Royal Commission on the Press 1961–2 Report*, Appendix 3, Tables 3 and 5; *Royal Commission on the Press 1974–7 Final Report*, Annex 3, Table 4; *Press Council Annual Report 1988*, Table 1 and Table A.

Notes: <sup>a</sup> This relates to 1975. <sup>b</sup> In addition there was one local daily and one Sunday freesheet. <sup>c</sup> Excluding freesheets.

The contraction of the press troubled both the 1962 and 1977 Commissions. But what disturbed them even more was evidence that there was a built-in impetus towards contraction. ‘The natural tendency’, concluded the 1962 Commission, ‘of the economic factors affecting [newspaper] production and sale is to diminish the number of papers where competition is close.’ This pessimistic conclusion was based on its analysis of the unequal competitive relationship that often developed between strong and weak papers. Successful papers, the Commission found, enjoyed a double advantage over weaker competitors: they had generally lower unit costs due to greater economies of scale, and more revenue. This enabled them to outspend their rivals; win more circulation through higher spending; and drive their weaker rivals into debt by making them incur additional expenditure in an attempt to stay competitive. The 1977 Commission broadly endorsed this view, although it drew attention to ‘countervailing forces’ offsetting scale economies. The Commission also pointed to further ways in which powerful press groups had increased their domination of the market. Economies of consolidation had enabled them to buy out rivals at above the market rate. Their large financial resources and accumulated expertise had also equipped them to be successful innovators. The 1977 Commission found that only two out of a sample of twenty-four local weeklies launched between 1961 and 1976 had originated from independent publishers. It also discovered that over half the consumer magazines with a circulation of over 30,000 started between 1966 and 1974 had come from just four publishing groups. ‘The larger companies’, the Commission’s research team concluded, ‘are better placed to incur the considerable costs that are required to enter some markets.’<sup>4</sup>

Table 7 *The number of urban centres with competing local dailies, 1921–88*

	<i>Urban centres with a choice of:</i>	
	<i>Local morning paper<sup>a</sup></i>	<i>Local evening paper</i>
1921 <sup>b</sup>	15	27
1937 <sup>b</sup>	6	10
1948	4	11
1961	2	9
1974	2	1
1988	2	–

*Sources:* *Royal Commission on the Press 1947–9 Report*, Appendix 2, Table 1; *Royal Commission on the Press 1961–2 Report*, Appendix 3, Table 4; N. Hartley, P. Gudgeon, and R. Crafts, *Concentration of Ownership in the Provincial Press*, Royal Commission on the Press 1974–7, Research Series 5 (London HMSO, 1977), Table 6.1; *Press Council Annual Report 1988*, Table 1.

*Notes:* <sup>a</sup> Excluding London. <sup>b</sup> Excluding Ulster.

The last two Commissions came, in effect, to the uncomfortable conclusion that there was no free market solution to the central problem they had diagnosed: namely that the processes of competition reduce competition. The 1962 Commission reluctantly concluded that increased efficiency in the press – although desirable in itself – offered no panacea. Cost saving, it argued, might offer a weak publication temporary respite, ‘but the important point’, it stressed, ‘is that reduction in costs, however desirable in itself, will not, if equally applied to all newspapers, improve the relative position of the weaker publication’. Similarly the 1977 Commission emphasized that potential savings could be achieved through the introduction of new technology. But it too concluded that this would not neutralize the dynamic inequalities inherent in competition between weak and strong papers. ‘Even if all newspapers accomplish the change [in technology]’, concluded the Commission, ‘competition may still result in some papers closing since the new technology does little to alter the relative position of competing titles.’

Subsequent developments since its 1977 report do not justify overturning this verdict. Nor do they vindicate the Panglossian hopes that accompanied the introduction of technology, at least as far as the newspaper press is concerned.<sup>5</sup> Contrary to what was widely predicted, computerized technology has not reduced the market share of the three leading publishers; it has not extended the ideological range of the newspaper press; it has not reinvigorated popular publishing through the proliferation of new, minority papers: and, its impact in refuelling competition in the national press has proved short-lived. Most of the new national papers launched with new technology have folded, and the rise in press costs in the last decade has raised once again the barrier to market entry.

### **Fumble and bumble**

The last two Commissions’ reports reveal the gradual weakening of beliefs that have legitimized the market-based press system from the mid-nineteenth century onwards. They show how the growth of chain ownership has weakened the credibility of proprietors as a source of press diversity; how external business entanglements have weakened their claim to financial independence; and, above all, how the recurrence of market failure has diminished confidence in those processes that are said, in liberal theory, to make the press representative.

Given the highly critical nature of their analysis, the last two Commissions had perhaps two options. One was to go down the American road of reworking traditional liberal theory around the concepts of social responsibility, internal pluralism, and journalistic professionalism. This seeks to compensate for monopoly and chain ownership, and is in practice a way of legitimating the market system. But in a British context it has radical implications in that it celebrates objective journalism and professional autonomy, and runs counter to the hierarchical, partisan tradition of the British national press.



The alternative was to follow the European route of seeking to sustain press competition and diversity through social market policies.<sup>6</sup> These seek to close the gap between liberal theory and reality by repairing the market. They range from subsidies to assist the launch of new papers to grants and tax concessions designed to prevent newspapers from closing. But this option, too, had radical implications since it meant breaking with the traditional press policy in Britain of having no policy.

In the event, the last two Royal Commissions dithered between these two options without backing either. Their indecision was the root cause of their ineffectiveness.

### **The Commissions' programme of reform**

Perhaps the closest the Press Commissions came to following a social market strategy was to advocate special anti-monopoly measures for the press. This was tentatively initiated by the 1949 Commission which proposed that the Monopolies Commission should monitor changes in press ownership with increased vigilance. This had no discernible effect.

Its successor recommended in 1961 the setting up of a Press Amalgamations Court. A variant of this proposal became law in 1965. It required all large press groups to obtain the permission of the Secretary of State before they were allowed to purchase any newspaper. The 1977 Commission demonstrated that this law (incorporated into the 1973 Fair Trading Act) had been ineffectual, and argued that it should be strengthened. Its advice was ignored.

Nothing has happened since then to suggest that the Fair Trading Act has had any significant impact on the press. Between 1965 and 1993, large press groups sought permission to buy 120 newspaper companies under the terms of the Act. Of these, only four applications were disallowed, and they all involved relatively minor newspapers. By contrast, every major newspaper acquisition – including Murdoch's purchase of Times Newspapers,<sup>7</sup> and the Mirror Group's joint buy-out of Independent Newspapers – was waved through.

In 1995, the government announced that it would relax the rules on referrals to the Monopolies and Mergers Commission, having overruled the Monopolies Commission's objection to the Mail Group's acquisition of the *Nottingham Evening Post* the year before. However, this policy shift changed very little in practice since the previous controls had achieved so little.

The impact of successive Press Commissions in this area was thus limited. They manifestly failed to prevent the rapid increase in press concentration that took place. Yet, while promoting ineffectual controls, the last two Commissions opposed proposals for divesting the major press groups – originating from the centre as well as the left of the political spectrum.<sup>8</sup> They also objected to the introduction of a selective subsidy system of a sort that had curbed the growth of press concentration in Sweden and elsewhere.<sup>9</sup>

### *Restriction on joint media ownership*

The first Press Commission urged that the ownership of the press and broadcasting should be kept separate. No attention was paid to its views when commercial television was introduced in 1955. The second Press Commission criticized the press's involvement in commercial television but was prevented from making any explicit recommendation by its terms of reference. Contrary to the spirit of its report, press groups continued to retain shareholdings in commercial television. Indeed they were even given a prescriptive right to participate in setting up local commercial radio stations in their circulation areas when independent radio was introduced in 1972.

This prescriptive right was ended by the 1981 Broadcasting Act on the recommendation of the 1977 Press Commission. The IBA also adopted a policy of reducing press interests in broadcasting in response to the urging of both the 1977 Press Commission and the Annan Committee on Broadcasting, and this was formalized in the 1990 Broadcasting Act.

However, the three Commissions' opposition to cross-ownership of press and broadcasting was ignored when it came to the development of satellite and cable television, with the result that Murdoch became controller of both the largest press and satellite television enterprises in the UK. The 1996 Broadcasting Act also partly reversed previous policy by allowing most newspaper groups to expand into terrestrial television, and by relaxing the rules about cross-ownership of local press and local radio.

### **Self-regulation**

If the Press Commissions' limited engagement with social market policies was a relative failure, their flirtation with a professionalizing strategy was hardly more successful. The most concrete reform to emerge from their efforts was the establishment of a self-regulatory agency. This was conceived by the 1949 Commission as a well-funded and widely respected public body concerned not only with investigating complaints against the press but also with such matters as the recruitment and education of journalists and the promotion of substantial research into the press. The 'General Council of the Press', envisaged by the Commission, was to be similar to the General Medical Council. It would embody and promote a professional culture among journalists.

The Press Council was set up reluctantly by the industry in 1953, in an enfeebled form, following the threat of government imposed regulation. The Council's shortcomings were roundly condemned by the 1962 Commission, which urged government legislation if self-regulation was not improved. This produced some reforms – notably, the appointment of an independent chairman and the annual publication of press concentration statistics. But these reforms failed to impress the third Commission. 'We hope,' concluded its scathing report,

‘that in future the Press Council will be more vigilant in demonstrating the independence and impartiality to which it lays claim.’

The 1977 Commission made twelve recommendations for a complete overhaul of the Press Council’s organization and procedures. Nine of these (including most of the important ones) were rejected until a fresh threat of government legislation led to another round of reluctant reforms in 1989. However, these were judged to be too little and too late by the Calcutt Committee which recommended that the Press Council be disbanded and replaced by a more effective agency. The Press Complaints Commission (PPC) was established in 1989. It was investigated four years later, and was found wanting by Sir David Calcutt who concluded:

The Press Complaints Commission is not, in my view, an effective regulator of the press. It has not been set up in a way, and is not operating a code of conduct, which enables it to command not only press but also public confidence. . . . It is not the truly independent body that it should be.

Following this report, the PPC duly appointed a new chairman and promised significant improvements. Once again, the cycle of public scrutiny and condemnation, followed by contrition and the promise of reform, was resumed. However, nothing much changed.

The Calcutt strategy – before Calcutt gave up and urged a statutory regime – involved concentrating on one function, the adjudication of complaints, in the hope that a more focused form of self-regulation would make the Press Council more effective. Not only did this strategy fail: it also meant departing still further from the first Press Commission’s vision of the Press Council as an institution that would foster a professional culture.

The first Press Commission’s dream also failed for other reasons. The rekindling of competitive pressures, after the end of newsprint controls, made the press more sensationalist and irresponsible. The revival of partisan proprietorship also weakened a professional culture centred on the ideal of objectivity.

In short, the Commission’s vision of fostering ‘a sense of public responsibility and public service’ through the agency of the Press Council proved to be quixotic. The Press Council never worked in the way it was supposed to; it was imposed from outside, and did not have the full backing of the industry; and the professionalizing project it embodied was undermined by stronger forces than it was able to command.

### *Miscellany*

The 1949 Commission also recommended that broadly based educational courses for journalists should be started, which would promote higher standards of professionalism.

What emerged were courses that were narrowly vocational and encouraged uncritical acceptance of traditional values in the industry. The last Commission advocated a widening of journalism education to little effect. Most of its detailed proposals were ignored; and its chosen instrument of change, the Printing and Publishing Industry Training Board, was later abolished by the Thatcher government.

Press Commissions have also advocated other reforms – that newspapers should prominently display the name of their owner, that they should declare an interest when reporting on economic activities in which their parent or associated companies are financially involved, that national papers should receive cheap loans to assist the introduction of new technology, and that the press should abide by a Charter of good practice drawn up by the last Commission, which would be policed by a reformed Press Council on a voluntary basis for a trial period. No attention has been paid to any of these proposals.

In short, successive Royal Commissions have had very little influence on the press. Most of their proposals have been ignored. The few reforms that have been introduced have proved relatively ineffectual. In so far as the Commissions have exerted any real influence, it has been largely negative in discouraging the adoption of any of the social market reforms implemented elsewhere in Europe.<sup>10</sup> They have thus contributed little towards relieving the problems identified in their reports through a programme of reform.

### **Reworking liberal theory**

However, the significance of Royal Commissions on the press was not confined solely to their influence on public policy. They also drew together different sources of evidence and different views in new processes of synthesis. They had therefore unique opportunities for modifying and updating theoretical justifications of the press in a form that took account of changes in its structure and ownership.

There is one passage in the last Commission's report of particular interest in this context, since it seemed to indicate a new approach:

We define the freedom of the press as that freedom from restraint which is essential to enable proprietors, editors and journalists to advance the public interest by publishing the facts and opinions without which a democratic electorate cannot make responsible judgements.

By defining press freedom in these collective terms, the Commission appeared to be modifying the traditional concept of press freedom as the property right of proprietors. The novelty of this approach was seemingly confirmed by the clauses in the Commission's

proposed Charter which upheld the freedom of conscience of individual journalists and the right of editors to accept any contribution 'notwithstanding the views of his proprietor'.

But this new approach was not sustained. The overriding concern of the Charter, reflected in numerous, detailed prohibitions, was to protect proprietors and their editors from journalists and their principal collective organization, the National Union of Journalists. The traditionalism that really informed the Commission's attitude towards the press was further revealed by its discussion of how proprietors might be prevented from abusing their power. It accepted the Newspaper Publishers Association's argument that 'in reality editorial and managerial decisions were inseparable' and that writing certain freedoms into editors' contracts – such as the right to criticize the activities of other parts of the organization to which their papers belonged – was 'too constricting'. On the wider issue of internal democracy, urged by some as an essential safeguard against the abuse of proprietorial power, the Commission made the extraordinary admission that it had 'not examined the issues raised in such a way as to enable us to express a view on this complex and disputed subject'.

A similar ambivalence characterized the 1977 Commission's representation of the free market. A substantial part of its analysis drew attention to the limitations of conventional liberal accounts. In particular, the Commission was at pains to demonstrate that the economic freedom to publish was extremely limited. But this painstaking analysis went by the board when it discussed the emotive issue of the closed shop. It simply invoked an idealized image of the free market as a guarantor of 'the right of a man to express what he believes', which it had challenged elsewhere.

The Commission's inconsistency and ambivalence was partly the product of a committee papering over its internal differences. But it also reflected an uneasy awareness that the rhetoric of liberal press theory no longer corresponded to reality. It was this uneasiness that prompted the Commission's tentative espousal of a philosophy of public service. Newspapers, it declared, should behave 'with proper restraint'; the press should be like broadcasting and recruit more graduates; young journalists should attend improving courses and 'learn about society'.

Indeed the Commission seemed intent, at times, on transplanting the public service rationale of broadcasting to the press. But its moves in this direction were hesitant and contradictory. It wanted a public service orientation but was opposed to the framework of public regulation that underpins it. It favoured a more balanced, responsible approach to journalism but was also committed to the tradition of partisanship and outspoken comment upheld by the free market tradition of the press. Unable to define precisely what it meant by professionalism, the Commission was not very successful at promoting it. But its flirtation with the idea of public service was nevertheless revealing: it was an attempt to co-opt a different theoretical tradition in a bid to bolster the increasingly threadbare classical theory of press freedom.

### Commissions' evasion

Official enquiries thus failed to advance a new set of persuasive arguments to replace traditional liberal theory. Unable either to rationalize away or to remedy the problems they found, the Commissions derived comfort from the belief that the importance of the press had been exaggerated. This argument was stated explicitly by the first two Commissions, and implicitly by the last one. By implication, the failure to prescribe practical remedies after concluding that the patient was in need of treatment did not – at the end of the day – greatly matter.

The Commissions' second method of evasion was to see the press in traditional functionalist terms. Newspapers were portrayed as informing, entertaining, and representing the public as a single entity. This enabled the Commissions to avoid thinking about how the press related to the power structure of society. It also enabled the last Commission, in particular, to evade the implications of its own analysis which suggested that the press was a subsidiary of big business, strongly right wing and unrepresentative of its readers.

Yet both the 'limited effects' model of the press and traditional functionalist theory now have a distinctly old-fashioned look. Both spring from the intellectual fashions dominant between the 1940s and 1960s.<sup>11</sup> They are rooted in the discredited arguments of the past, scarcely a firm foundation for continued evasion in the future.

### Weak opposition

The lack of a coherent and convincing set of ideas legitimizing the present pattern of press ownership leaves proprietors potentially vulnerable to attack. However, there seems little likelihood that such an attack will be forthcoming in the immediate future, at least in a form that press controllers need pay attention to.

What makes the 1990s different from the 1930s is that there is no longer a powerful bloc on both the right and the left that is fundamentally critical of the press system. The assault on the press barons in the 1930s came from the heart of the Conservative establishment, spearheaded by the Conservative Party leader, Stanley Baldwin, and was echoed later by the attack of the Labour Party leader, George Lansbury, on the 'millionaire press'. In contrast there are now no political leaders on the mainstream left or right who are openly critical of the way in which the press is organized.

This is partly because there developed an uneasy *rapprochement* between the Conservative Party and right-wing press, following the bitter confrontations of the inter-war period. The case of the Labour Party was more complex. The Labour movement ceased to be a direct stakeholder in the press system when its mass circulation newspapers closed down in the 1960s. Its alienation turned into mounting hostility when the trade union movement became the target of sustained press attack. The first sign of a political shift occurred in 1974,

with the publication of the Labour Party Study Group report, *People and the Media*, most of whose proposals became official policy in the 1970s. Reworked versions of these, committing the party to curbing press concentration and promoting press pluralism, were incorporated into its 1983 and 1987 general election manifestos.

However, by the 1990s, the Labour leadership became increasingly mute on the subject of press reform. Greater priority was given to winning press support, symbolized by Tony Blair's 1995 trip to Hayman Island, Australia to speak to the massed ranks of News Corporation executives. Reform took second place to winning press goodwill and regaining office after almost two decades in the political wilderness. Meanwhile the press trade unions, formerly a key part of the lobby for press reform, had been crushed. The left, though still vocal and represented by the indomitable Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom, had no effective base from which to mount a popular campaign.

Yet, ironically, while political forces wanting to change the press system backed off or lost influence, the general public became more critical. In 1975 (according to MORI), more than half the public were inclined to believe what they read in the press, compared with fewer than two-fifths in 1989. Criticism of the tabloid press in particular intensified. A 1989 Gallup Poll reported that only 12 per cent of the public thought that papers like the *Sun* generally published the truth. A 1993 MORI poll found that a mere 10 per cent generally trusted journalists, compared with 70 per cent who generally trusted television newsreaders.

But this growing distrust found expression in personal criticism of journalists rather than in proposals for reform of the press as an institution. And in so far as the case for reform was aired in the public arena, it tended to be monopolized by disgruntled politicians angry at the way in which their personal behaviour was subject to press scrutiny, and channelled towards protecting privacy. In this context, where reforming politicians have failed to give an adequate lead, it seems likely that press freedom will continue to be equated tacitly with the property rights of proprietors, though perhaps more from habitual assumption than considered conviction.

### Notes

- 1 This is a central theme of part I of this book.
- 2 The Commission was less troubled than it might have been partly because its analysis of the evidence concealed the full extent of the trend towards concentration of ownership. Its main report did not examine chain ownership in terms of total daily and Sunday circulation as its predecessors had done, and did not take properly into account the long-term development of press concentration in the period before 1961.
- 3 In this context it is worth noting Colin Seymour-Ure's argument that the transfer of control of the press from political parties to unaccountable capitalist conglomerates with an interest in the outcome of government policy has undermined the legitimacy of the press. (See his 'National daily papers and the party system' in *Studies on the Press*, Royal Commission on the Press Working Paper 3, London, HMSO, 1977).

- 4 N. Hartley, P. Gudgeon, and R. Crafts, *Concentration of Ownership in the Provincial Press*, Royal Commission on the Press 1974–7, Research Series 5 (London, HMSO, 1977); *Periodicals and the Alternative Press*, Royal Commission on the Press, Research Series 6 (London, HMSO, 1977).
- 5 See chapter 7.
- 6 P. Humphreys, *Mass Media and Media Policy in Western Europe* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1996).
- 7 The government failed to refer Murdoch's purchase of Times Newspapers to the Monopolies Commission on the cynically misleading grounds that the newspaper group was in such financial difficulty that its immediate future was in doubt. This claim rested solely on the group's performance in 1980, an untypical year when Times Newspapers were recovering from a long strike and were hit by a severe advertising recession, which concealed the group's underlying profitability.
- 8 Proposals for divestment came from, among others, Sir Geoffrey Crowther (Royal Commission on the Press, Oral Evidence, vol. 1, p. 5, London, HMSO, 1962), and Professor Jeremy Tunstall (Royal Commission on the Press 1974–7, unpublished evidence), both from the centre left of the political spectrum.
- 9 K. E. Gustafsson, 'Policies to maintain newspaper diversity – the case of Sweden', School of Economics and Commercial Law, Department of Business Studies, University of Gothenberg, 1993.
- 10 The 1977 Commission contained a minority report, signed by two members, proposing a National Printing Corporation and a Launch Fund to assist the establishment of new publications. These recommendations were ignored.
- 11 J. Curran, 'Rethinking mass communications', in J. Curran, D. Morley, and V. Walkerdine (eds) *Cultural Studies and Communications* (London, Arnold, 1996).



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*Broadcasting and the theory of  
public service*

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British broadcasting was started as a public service, and this proved as creative commercially as it was innovative culturally. Indeed, until recently every stage of its development, from the emergence of the BBC, through the introduction of commercial television, to the founding of Channel 4, depended on a set of linked and radical expansions. First, at each stage a novel source of finance was discovered. In turn the growth of broadcasting was financed by the licence fee, advertising revenue, and then a tax on the profits of the commercial companies (but one devoted to making programmes). These sources of finance did not compete with each other, and were key to the possibility of political independence. Each stage produced new audiences for broadcasting – the BBC creating an image of its audience as ‘participants’ in the great affairs of the nation, commercial television popularizing the medium, and Channel 4 decisively registering and enhancing the interests of minority audiences. Finally of course, at each stage new kinds of programmes and styles of addressing audiences were evolving. Until the 1980s, broadcasting in Britain was not fettered but liberated for cultural and political expansion by the requirements of public service.

The principle of public service – which has always been fought over and continually reinterpreted – was not the paternalistic and abstract rule which critics have suggested. Nor has it been damaging to entrepreneurial initiative. Indeed, public service regulation has secured the survival of a successful broadcasting industry, one which has become more significant economically and which has become an important exporter of programmes while continuing to discuss and mould national issues. It has of course also never been perfect. Broadcasters have often failed to perceive the public interest and, even more frequently, have been too acquiescent to political pressure. Broadcasting has often been used by dominant political actors. Nevertheless, it has provided a flexible means of managing and developing an important utility which has been commercially successful and also served the public.

In the 1980s 'public service' became unfashionable. Yet those who derided it often had a financial interest in weakening it, or, alternatively, disliked the political autonomy of broadcasting. However, public service is not a static or dated ideal, it is one we need to redefine and develop. What were the origins of the principle and how did it come to be undermined?

Broadcasting in Britain – monopoly or duopoly – always depended on an assumption of commitment to an undivided public good. This lay beneath all official thinking on radio and television until the 1970s. In 1977 the Annan Report abandoned this assumption, and replaced it with a new principle of liberal pluralism. The ideal ceased to be the broad consensus – the middle ground upon which all men of good sense could agree. Rather it became, for Annan and those who supported and inspired him, a free market-place in which balance could be achieved through the competition of multiplicity of independent voices. The result has been confusion and crisis, from which no new received doctrine has yet emerged.

So, by 1982, the Hunt Report on the introduction of cable television could begin to modify the principles of balance and quality even further. These were relegated to a part of the national service in the BBC and ITV. Although both the Hunt Report and the subsequent White Paper advocated some safeguards to protect the British system from the damaging effects of foreign satellite transmissions, and to guarantee the rights of the networks to televise events of national interest, the basis of public service broadcasting was abandoned. Thus cable television, free from constraining ideals, was left to produce programmes that 'were sufficiently attractive for the public to buy'.<sup>1</sup> The 1990 Broadcasting Act suggested that contenders for broadcasting franchises should produce 'sufficient amounts of quality programmes', but not only was this undefined, it only occupied two paragraphs in the Act. By contrast, conditions governing the financial arrangements for the auction of franchises took up fifteen pages.

However, the most obvious long-term symptom of the change in the status of the concept has been a shift in terminology. The concept of public service is elaborated in all broadcasting reports before that of the Annan Committee. As early as 1923 the Sykes Report argued that broadcasting was 'of great national importance as a medium for the performance of a valuable public service'.<sup>2</sup> The next report – that of the Crawford Committee in 1926 – suggested that in view of the scale, significance, and potentialities of broadcasting, the duties and status of the Corporation which it had just created 'should correspond with those of a public service, and the directorate should be appointed with the sole object of promoting the utmost utility and development of the enterprise'.<sup>3</sup>

Later reports developed the consequences of this view. 'The influence of broadcasting upon the mind and speech of the nation', commented the Ullswater Report, made it an 'urgent necessity in the national interest that the broadcasting service should at all times be conducted

in the best possible manner and to the best possible advantage of the people'.<sup>4</sup> In 1950 the Beveridge Report on broadcasting characterized the ideal of public service more actively. 'Like the work of the universities,' Beveridge suggested, 'the work of broadcasting should be regarded as a public service for a social purpose.'<sup>5</sup> The Pilkington Report, which considered both the BBC and the commercial service in 1962, added to this definition: 'The concept of broadcasting has always been of a service, comprehensive in character, with the duty of a public corporation of bringing to public awareness the whole range of . . . activity and expression developed in society.'<sup>6</sup> Indeed the organization of commercial television was as much a product of the ideal of public service broadcasting as the BBC's had been originally. Thus successive reports developed the idea of broadcasting as a public service – catering for all sections of the community, reaching all parts of the country regardless of cost, seeking to educate, inform, and improve, and prepared to lead public opinion rather than follow it.

The Annan Report in many respects broke with this tradition for the first time. This change was noticeable, both in the evidence which was presented to the committee, as well as in the conclusion of the report. Even the reformers, whether of the left or right, disregarded the public service principle entirely. The BBC referred to it in only the most apologetic tone. The Annan Committee itself took a pluralist view: broadcasting should cater for the full range of groups and interests in society, rather than seek to offer moral leadership. 'For the individual life is a gamble, he is entitled to stake everything, if he desires, on one interpretation of life,' it argued. 'But broadcasting organizations have to back the field, and put their money on all the leading horses which line up at the starting gate.'<sup>7</sup> In one elegant metaphor, much of the basis of public service broadcasting had been dismissed, despite the fact that Channel 4 was in many ways, in practice an extension of it.

Indeed the Annan Report's reinterpretation of public service unintentionally left British broadcasters defenceless against the threats posed by recent technological developments. By so transforming public service it left no grounds on which to manage or control the impact of the inevitable introduction of cable, video, or satellite broadcasting. Since 1977, reports and White Papers on the future of these very technologies have not even attempted to assess the impact of unregulated competition for audiences, revenues, and programmes on the television system as a whole. Thus it was possible for the Hunt Report to suggest that viewers' willingness to pay for cable television simply constituted a new source of revenue. It was claimed that this would not divert resources from existing channels. (However, it was not apparently thought necessary to support this assertion by either evidence or argument.)

By contrast there was a radical development in the 1986 Peacock Report, which reinterpreted the role of the market in broadcasting.<sup>8</sup> While advocating what Samuel Brittan, a leading monetarist journalist and theorist and member of the Peacock Committee, called 'the goal that British Broadcasting should move towards a sophisticated market system based

on consumer sovereignty', the report perceived public service commitments as actually protecting consumer sovereignty. Brittan commented that 'The existence of a tax-financed BBC and the IBA regulation of commercial television were justified by Peacock as a second best, but very successful, attempt to replicate artificially the programme structure of a true broadcasting market.' More than that, the committee took up the elaboration of the public service ideal developed in Channel 4 provision, and suggested that a mature broadcasting service would operate like the publishing industry. 'Pre-publication censorship, whether of printed material, plays, films, broadcasting or other creative activities or expressions of opinion, has no place in a free society', the report argued, and recommended that the government 'embark forthwith on a phased programme for ending it'. Brittan went on to point out not only that the report widened the scope of its enquiries far beyond its original brief of considering the introduction of advertising on to the BBC (which it rejected), by assessing the future of broadcasting and how that could be best managed in the context of technological developments, but also that the report demonstrated the fundamental social significance of broadcasting. As Brittan commented:

Peacock exposed many of the contradictions in the Thatcherite espousal of market forces. In principle, Mrs Thatcher and her supporters are in favour of de-regulation, competition, and choice. But they are distrustful . . . of plans to allow people to listen to and watch what they like, subject only to the law of the land. They espouse the market system but dislike the libertarian value judgements involved in its operation: value judgements which underlie the Peacock Report.<sup>9</sup>

The Peacock Report put public service back on the agenda at just the point when the broadcasting organizations seemed to have abandoned it.

Indeed this abandonment by the broadcasting organizations is a problem, for the authority of British broadcasting has always depended on the pursuit of public service. Indeed by relinquishing any claim to this, the broadcasting institutions have put into jeopardy a whole set of complex relationships between themselves, the state, their audiences, and their programme policy. What caused this crisis? What are its consequences?

### **The state and broadcasting**

One cause of the collapse of the principle of public service broadcasting has been the deterioration in the relationship between the state and broadcasting institutions. In the Sykes Report, Charles Trevelyan argued that 'We consider such a potential power over public

opinion and the life of the nation ought to remain with the state.' Because broadcasting was so important it was seen as 'essential that permission to transmit, and the matter to be transmitted should be subject to public authority'.

Air waves were a scarce resource which did not obey national boundaries. Consequently the state was obliged to control the right to broadcast in all societies. In the early British broadcasting reports, however, there is a consensus that state regulation is the best guarantee of broadcasting independence and accountability. As the Crawford Report put it, only the state could license the BBC to be 'a public corporation acting as trustee for the national interest'.

In the 1920s the problem of the relationship of government with broadcasting was dealt with by making new rules and creating new machinery. It was taken for granted that the control over the administration of an organization could be kept quite separate from whatever the organization did. Hence it was possible for broadcasting to be politically accountable, and yet remain independent of any political influence. The Sykes Report noted that any detailed control of the work of the Corporation would make a government 'constantly open to suspicion that it was using an opportunity to its own advantage'. It was therefore decided that the minister responsible for the service would be able to answer questions in the House on matters of principle and finance, but he should not be held responsible for the programmes themselves. Later the problem seemed to disappear. Complaints about government intervention were rare, and the issue of excessive interference no longer seemed to exist.

In 1936 the Ullswater Report commented, 'We have no reason to suppose that, in practice, divergent views of public interest have been held by the Corporation and government departments.' Pilkington argued in 1962 that 'The practical resolution of the problem was made easier because the first priority of the department concerned with exercising the government's responsibility (the GPO) is with technical matters.' No conflict had arisen between broadcasters and governments over the definition of public interest.

However, by the 1970s this pragmatic argument was felt to be inadequate. Imperceptibly the problem had become one of defending broadcasters against the state. The relationship was increasingly characterized as one of vigilant and stealthy hostility. A cold war had been declared between them.

This was partly a consequence of the changing nature of politics in Britain. In a world of increasingly sophisticated news reporting this posed problems for both the BBC and the IBA. 'Politics' and political balance could be treated simply in two- or three-party terms in the 1950s. By the 1970s this was no longer the case. The emergence of centre parties made the work of 'striking a balance' far more difficult for broadcasters. In addition many fields which had previously been regarded as non-controversial and administrative had moved into the political arena. But also because of a proliferation of parties, interests, and pressure groups, because of a widening gap between the major parties and, most of all, because of the rise of

issues – of which Northern Ireland was the most critical – for which the gentlemanly and constitutionalist assumptions of the early rule-makers could not cater. The problem of providing ‘balance’ in dealing with treasonable activities in Ulster – when, whether, and under what conditions to interview terrorists or members of illegal organizations, how to discuss the issue at all – forced the broadcasting directorates to make new rules and, in effect, to add to the corpus of Britain’s unwritten constitution.

The questions which the public asked about broadcasting, the Annan Report claimed, were becoming ‘more critical, more hostile and more political’. At the same time, there was a new public mood, ‘at once inflationary in the expectation of what political power could achieve, and deflationary towards those in power who failed to give effect to these expectations’.

The interests of governments had come, by the late 1970s, to be seen as inimical to those of broadcasting. The distinction between the broadcasting bureaucracies and what they produced had been challenged. Previously the quality and balance of a company’s programmes were believed to be guaranteed by the good order of the administration. This view was now replaced by one of increasingly detailed suspicion. More than that, broadcasters’ institutionalized caution about the power of governments had developed into a rejection of all kinds of intervention by the state.

This has had profound consequences for the legitimacy of the public service broadcasting organizations. The Annan Report argued that the authorities have a dual role: on the one hand they exist to ensure that broadcasters operate in the public interest and are responsive to public opinion, particularly as expressed in parliament. On the other hand, they exist ‘also to defend broadcasters from undue pressure from whatever quarter’. But these are not complementary obligations; rather they are contradictory. The authorities are supposed both to reflect political pressure and to resist it. It used to be possible for the authorities to perform these two functions when the interests of the state and the broadcasting organization were seen as similar, if not identical. However, once their interests are opposed, the two aspects of the authorities’ role are increasingly difficult to reconcile.

### **Accountability and broadcasting**

This situation would matter less if other mechanisms designed to relate broadcasting institutions to society seemed less perfunctory. Since 1926 they have all suffered from attrition.

Reith rapidly turned the Governors, supposedly ‘the trustees of the national interest’, into creatures of the Director General. In both commercial television and the BBC, the Boards of Governors depend for their information upon the organizations they were designed to

supervise, and they have no independent secretariat or research function. The Governors have remained relatively powerless, and do not see their job as one of representing external interests or views. Similarly the role of the advisory committees was ingeniously reinterpreted. Reith ensured that these acted as specialists (whether in music, speech, or religion) who merely offered their advice over particular policy issues to the Corporation, rather than experts in broadcasting as such.

Indeed the only independent source of power left within these supposedly governing bodies is that of the Chairman of the Board. This power derives from the Chairman's close personal association with the Director General – or the administrative head of the independent service. Yet this intimacy leads to what Heller has called 'the tendency of broadcasting authorities to identify their interests, and by implication the national interest very closely with the survival of the organization they supervise'.<sup>10</sup>

However, in the 1980s a series of political crises in which the role of broadcasting was crucial – the Falklands War, continuing trouble in Ireland, disputes about the interpretation of foreign events, and profound disagreements about the management of the economy – all exposed the potential vulnerability of the governing body and the Chairman to political influence. Indeed, the Conservative government sought to dominate the governors more directly than any previous administration, by swamping the board with its own supporters. In the 1980s, the problem was not so much the identification of the Chairman with the institution, but rather the identification of the Chairman with the government in power.

Yet the broadcasting organizations had given up so much of the ground themselves. By the 1980s the IBA was to claim that accountability was only a minority interest. The Annan Report had endorsed a system which was little more than a pious rhetoric. 'On balance', the report concluded '... while some improvements could be made, the relations between government and parliament and the broadcasting authorities do not require much adjustment: the chain of accountability is adequate.' Annan apparently believed that accountability was a purely abstract idea – one which includes no reference to the public. But the paragraph nevertheless ends, 'We do not consider, however, that the relations between the broadcasters and the public are satisfactory.' If, as Annan suggested, broadcasting is to abandon the independence of public service, and be based, rather, on a principle of representative pluralism, then the inadequacy of the Governors, and advisory committees, becomes even more serious. By the 1990s accountability had almost been dispensed with as a value. It had, up to a point, been replaced by that of market success.

### **Independent professionals or men with an interest?**

The independence of broadcasting from the state has recently been seen as the most important condition of the service's accountability. This independence has in turn been reduced to the

freedom of programme-makers. Yet as Beveridge once commented, 'To whom is a broadcaster responsible? If it is only to his own conscience the decision might better be described as irresponsible.'

This emphasis on broadcasters' rights is a consequence of focusing the assessment of broadcasting on individual programmes. Pilkington was the last report to elaborate the tradition of public service, and it also argued that 'A service of broadcasting should be judged, not by the stated aims of the broadcasters, but by its achievements.' The Annan Report endorsed this approach.

Nevertheless, broadcasting and broadcasting institutions cannot be understood merely as a collection of separate programme 'texts'. As an ACCT Report commented, judging broadcasting organizations by their product 'was like being asked to evaluate the Milk Marketing Board by drinking milk – relevant, but not adequate'.<sup>11</sup>

Broadcasting is a process which cannot be entirely understood from its products. Few would claim that the whole nature of the industrial enterprise can be understood from the shop floor of one factory. Neither can all the pressures which condition broadcasting institutions be revealed by an examination of what Tracey has called 'the world of determination of a television programme'<sup>12</sup> – however important that study might be. The emphasis on programmes as the most important criterion for judging broadcasting reinforces the arbitrary role of professionals at the expense of more general considerations of public service.

The Annan Report claimed that 'Good broadcasting would reflect the competing demands of a society which was increasingly multi-racial and pluralist.' In turn, this variety could be secured only by giving the 'talented broadcasters' greater freedom of expression.

However, broadcasters are not necessarily influenced by a wide variety of interests. Much research has shown how little producers and directors consider their audience. The only information about viewers which seriously affects producers is knowledge of the size of the audience. This is not because audience research is incapable of providing more complex detail, but because to know more would put producers under even greater stress. 'For a sociologist', commented Burns, 'it was rather like watching the whole practice of medicine being reduced to the use of a thermometer.'<sup>13</sup> Producers value the opinion of their colleagues most, but they see very little even of them.

The public interest cannot simply rely on the quality of broadcasters, because to do so is to ignore the pressures which determine broadcasting choices. 'When one stresses the role of individuals manning the system,' Garnham argues, 'one is tempted to await a Messiah who will come over – and help transform the system.'<sup>14</sup>

However, the relationship of broadcasters to their organization has also altered. Burns argued that there had been a considerable change in attitude since the 1960s. Then staff expressed a devotion to public service 'and a belief in the BBC's normative role in the cultural, moral and political life of the country'. By the 1970s this had been replaced by a



commitment to professional values. Indeed as Kumar points out, the emergence of professionalism as the dominating ideology is the product of a particular moment in the evolution of broadcasting organizations. Even the notion of 'lively broadcasting' which determines the professionals' judgements 'expresses a particular stance towards the audience, a judgement of what the audience can and cannot take, which reflects a particular conception of the purposes of broadcasting'.<sup>15</sup>

Indeed the new 'scientific management' of broadcasting organizations has greater power than earlier administrations, whose main concern had been to protect and assist programme-makers who had far higher status within the organization. 'Because of the need to allocate time and resources economically,' Burns argued, 'working relations became impersonally functional.' The steady march of rational managerialism had led to a withering of institutional ardour.

Indeed, professionalism is now being superseded in many broadcasting organizations by crude financial managerialism. The pursuit of profit rather than excellence is more likely to dominate decisions in the next decade. Government reforms, culminating in the 1989 Broadcasting Bill,<sup>16</sup> and the auctioning of Channels 3 and 5 to the 'highest bidders' (who in order to bid have to pass a programme quality 'threshold', but who were awarded franchises solely on their ability to raise the largest amounts of capital)<sup>17</sup> will inevitably reduce the power of programme-makers. These pressures are already evident: in the past broadcasting administrators had often been programme-makers first; in a survey of appointments to top posts in television the majority of posts were given to 'accountants, bankers, and financial managers'.<sup>18</sup> Consequently not only were the talented programme-makers upon whom Annan, for instance, rested the future of broadcasting less committed to public service than before, but also they had become less important within broadcasting organizations.

### **Independence and the theory of broadcasting**

The significance of broadcasting independence is also disputed. One side suggests that the independence is functional and must be extended to guarantee accountable broadcasting. The other argues that this same independence poses a serious threat to political institutions, whose control over broadcasting should be strengthened. Working from the same assumptions about the role of the media, Anthony Smith and Colin Seymour-Ure arrived at diametrically opposed diagnoses and solutions.

According to classic liberal theory the independence of a journalist depended on his ability to follow the uninhibited dictates of his conscience. According to Smith, this is an illusory ideal. In discussing the 1968 crisis in French broadcasting he argues that, 'The ORTF strikers had stumbled across the central dilemmas of broadcasting and were demanding in the name

of freedom . . . a right which no broadcaster has ever really achieved – the right to be an individual member of a Fourth Estate.’ In its place Smith put forward a far more sophisticated and powerful version of the theory, in which the independence of broadcasters is not an individual right – but rather a functional necessity.

Broadcasters are not free, but are ‘brokers and megaphones, impresarios and mediators’, he suggested. The ‘independence’ of broadcasting institutions from political control was one solution to a dilemma all broadcasting systems had to solve: namely the necessity not only of regulating the right to broadcast but also of ensuring that broadcasting served the interests of all sections of society. For, Smith suggested, ‘The institutions of broadcasting inaugurated a special problem of unlegitimized and unselective power.’ Broadcasters are obliged to negotiate political conflict and not take sides in it – precisely because of the immense and dangerous nature of their power. In stable systems countervailing interests would always be able to enforce damaging sanctions if broadcasters became partisan.

This model implies that all political interests in society can, in practice, be reconciled. It is a logical extension of broadcasting institutions’ own view of their role as arbiters that they come to see conflict and opposition as the products of failures in communication. Nevertheless, if there are real differences in interest, incompatible policies, and irreconcilable principles, then the role of the broker becomes untenable.

However, the functional independence of broadcasting institutions has many of the same policy consequences as the older liberal individualism. For, Smith argued, the way to meet recent criticisms is to give broadcasters more independence. The more perfectly broadcasters can do anything they want, the more adequate the service will be. As he is reported as commenting to the Annan Committee:

If I am free to say anything I want to say except the one thing I want to say then I am not free. . . . In broadcasting . . . a single prohibition imposed on a national broadcasting authority or within it tends to corrode the whole output.

Colin Seymour-Ure views the ‘independence’ of broadcasters rather differently. The independence of the press – no longer the client of political parties – and ‘now part of vast corporations who may have very direct interests in the outcomes of policy decisions’ is vulnerable because it is compromised by ownership. Broadcasters, moreover, having abandoned the protection of ‘public service’ ideology are also susceptible to accusations of bias. Seymour-Ure argues that:

Some Labour politicians used to take comfort in the fact that although the press might be disproportionately conservative, at least broadcasting was balanced. This is no longer

true. No doubt broadcasters are not wilfully biased. But the simple fact of deciding their own programme content may in the extreme case lead to a projection of party politicians and leaders that might run entirely counter to the parties' own views.

He suggests that the current interpretation of broadcasting independence has seriously damaged the political system.

The ideal of broadcasting independence – unlimited by any obligation to public service – has become increasingly inadequate. It has contributed to a growing anti-government ethos. It is hostile to many forms of political partisanship. It may inhibit political change and development. It may be that, as Seymour-Ure comments, the period of mass-based party organization is ending, for one effect of television in many countries seems to be 'the erosion of intervening structures between representatives and electors'. Nevertheless, any increase in the autonomy of broadcasting institutions may have more serious political consequences than had been expected. Rather it is the democratic processes which need support: not because broadcasters are malign but because of the inexorable pressure of broadcasting independence on the handling of politics. And the devotion of increasing amounts of political energy to managing the media – rather than managing politics.

### **Choice versus public service?**

Double think, according to George Orwell, is the 'power of holding two contradictory beliefs in one's mind simultaneously and accepting both of them'. Through successive regimes, *double think* has nevertheless precisely defined the attitude of politicians towards broadcasting. On the one hand there are people (government ministers, for instance) who tend to believe that the worse excesses of broadcasting, as of the trade unions, should be curbed. There are others (shadow ministers, for instance) who look to broadcasting as a means to correct political bias.

Never, however, have the contradictions been so glaring as in the recent past. The politics of the 1980s and 1990s were orchestrated in a language of freedom, choice, non-intervention, withdrawal of the state: yet they were deformed with successive governmental limitations on the public right to be informed. Where individuals have sought to challenge state manipulation of the news the government showed neither mercy nor moderation in making an example of offenders. Indeed, the effective range of discussion and investigation is probably narrower here than in most modern democracies – including France, Sweden, West Germany, and possibly even the USA. It may not be long before the former Eastern bloc leaves us behind in the matter of broadcasting freedom. Who can imagine the Home Office giving a foreign camera crew *carte blanche* to film what they liked in the Maze Prison – in the

way that the Soviet authorities recently provided open access to a Western team in one of the USSR's remaining political gaols?

In addition to this, during the 1980s the Conservative government blatantly used television for government propaganda – with a massive increase in public sector advertising. Between 1980 and 1989, commercial television revenues doubled in real terms, and the proportion of advertising revenue generated by the public sector over that period quadrupled, indeed by 1989 it had become the largest single buyer of television advertising. The privatizations of public utilities were the single largest source of television advertising finance between 1990 and 1995.<sup>19</sup> If the ostensible purpose of the advertising was the sale of shares in the shortly to be privatized public sector industries, it also furthered the ideology of privatization.

Throughout the period, public service broadcasting was compared unfavourably with ‘the real choice offered to consumers by a more effective market’.<sup>20</sup> Successive reports, government green papers, and bills proposed to ‘set free broadcasters from the narrow constraints of control’ and it was repeatedly argued that satellite, cable, and a deregulated broadcasting system would offer the public a greater choice of programmes more sensitively tailored to their wants by the competitive pressures of the market. In part, of course, government policy was attempting to adapt to a new situation in which cable and satellite would deliver such a multitude of channels and services that the previous regime of regulation would become practically impossible. But more than this, policy was driven by a profound hostility to the principles of public service broadcasting.

Yet the ideology of ‘choice’ was absurd. Commercial broadcasting is based, not on the sale of programmes to audiences, but on the sale of audiences to advertisers. Thus the introduction of more competitors will reduce advertising revenues both by spreading them between a greater number of channels and by splitting potential audiences into even smaller groups. As the main incentive will remain the attraction of the largest possible audience, the competing channels, less constrained by regulation to produce a variety of programmes, will tend to show more of the same or similar programmes.

Indeed, if one contradiction of Thatcherism was that free market rhetoric was accompanied by interventionist practice, another was that talk of the market-place was accompanied by its virtual eradication. Technological change – with its requirement for long-term investment and large-scale capitalization – has produced a bureaucratic jungle of profit-taking conglomerates, which own shares in all the media which the public consumes. The small number of corporate owners are not competitive in a sense that could conceivably be expected to produce an improved product; but their financial rivalry will undoubtedly impose pressure to produce a cheaper one. That means an almost inevitable lowering of standards, since it is cheaper to buy in internationalized soap opera than to make your own drama, and so on. The result is likely to be a lesser variety of the kind of programmes that many of us

watch some of the time, and some of us watch most of the time, but which do not attract top audience ratings. We are all, on occasions, members of minorities. Thus the victims of media concentration are variety, creativity, and quality, while the proliferation of broadcasting channels in the hands of a small band of operators, 'liberated' by government policy from the obligations of public service variety, is likely to make matters worse. 'Choice', without positive direction, is a myth, for all too often the market will deliver more – but only more of the same.

### **Conclusion**

Broadcasters have come to see the state as their enemy. Yet broadcasting institutions ultimately depend on the state for their legitimation. This authority cannot be replaced by a pluralist ideal of reflecting social and cultural variety. Indeed the adoption of this principle has left broadcasters peculiarly vulnerable to the more general attack on public service broadcasting.

Moreover, arguments with quite different aims from those of the broadcasters, but apparently related, are being used to undermine broadcasting responsibility and independence. Thus neither the emphasis on the authority of the viewers' right to choose from a greater variety of programmes, nor the elaboration of some aspects of the local and regional role of the media, let alone the distinction between a 'service' the public will pay for and a public service, are intended to strengthen the creative autonomy of broadcasters. On the contrary, they are arguments which enhance the power of commercial interests in determining the patterns of broadcasting provision.

Thus without a commitment to public service, broadcasters are increasingly vulnerable to detailed political interference in the content of programmes. Broadcasting in Britain has in the past had a considerable degree of autonomy from other institutions: it has not in any simple sense been biased. This autonomy is now threatened, partly because the consensus about what constitutes the 'middle ground' of agreed opinion has broken down, partly because the reliance on the skill of professional broadcasters which has replaced it is unjustified, and partly because of the erosion of public service broadcasting. Broadcasting needs to find a new relationship to the state – and a new form of commitment to public service, and indeed a new definition of public service that will work in the conditions of increased competition.

### **Notes**

- 1 *Report of the Enquiry into Cable Expansion and Broadcasting Policy* (Hunt Report, 1982) [Cmnd 8697].
- 2 *Broadcasting Committee: Report* (Sykes Report, 1923) [Cmnd 1951], X, 13, para. 21.

- 3 *Report of the Broadcasting Committee* (Crawford Report, 1926) [Cmnd 2599], VIII, 327, para. 49.
- 4 *Report of the Broadcasting Committee* (Ullswater Report, 1936) [Cmnd 5091], VII, 617, para. 7.
- 5 *Report of the Broadcasting Committee* (Beveridge Report, 1951 ) [Cmnd 8116], IX, 1, para. 217.
- 6 *Report of the Committee on Broadcasting* (Pilkington Report, 1962) [Cmnd 1755], IV, 259, para. 23.
- 7 *Report of the Committee on the Future of Broadcasting* (Annan Report, 1977) [Cmnd 6753], XVI, para. 311.
- 8 *Report of the Committee on Financing the BBC* (Peacock Report, 1986) [Cmnd 9824], II, para. 636.
- 9 S. Brittan, 'The fight for freedom in broadcasting', *Political Quarterly*, 58, 1 (March 1987).
- 10 C. Heller, *Broadcasters and Accountability*, BFI Television Monograph 3 (London, British Film Institute, 1978), p. 39.
- 11 ACCT report, quoted in C. Heller, *Broadcasters and Accountability*, BFI Television Monograph 3 (London, British Film Institute, 1978), p. 50.
- 12 M. Tracey, *The Production of Political Television* (London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978), p. 13.
- 13 T. Burns, *The BBC: Public Institution and Private World* (London, Macmillan, 1977), p. 137.
- 14 N. Garnham, *Structures of Television*, BFI Television Monograph 1 (London, British Film Institute, 1973), p. 21.
- 15 K. Kumar, 'Holding the middle ground: The BBC, the public and the professional broadcaster' in J. Curran, M. Gurevitch, and J. Woollacott (eds), *Mass Communication and Society* (London, Edward Arnold/Open University, 1977), p. 232.
- 16 Broadcasting Bill, Bill No. 9, December 1989 (London, HMSO, 300906).
- 17 See Martin Cave, 'The conduct of auctions for broadcasting franchises', *Fiscal Studies* 10, 1 (Feb. 1989), pp. 17–31.
- 18 'New managers, new talents', *Vision* (Dec. 1989), pp. 15–31.
- 19 'Television advertising by sector', *Campaign* (July 1989); 'Public utilities flotation advertising spend 1990–95', Hargreaves & Whitticker, Spencer Report, *Adcam*, 1996.
- 20 S. Velachsky, 'Broadcasting choice', *Hobart Papers on Liberal Economics* (June 1989), p. 7.



## **Part IV**

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### *Politics of the media*

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## *Contradictions in media policy*

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### **Introduction**

To inform, to discuss, to mirror, to bind, to campaign, to challenge, to entertain, and to judge – these are the important functions of the media in any free country. The purpose of public policy should be to enable the media to perform them more effectively. Yet historically, very different traditions of promoting these ideals or indeed pursuing no ideals at all have developed in public policy towards the press and broadcasting. Newspapers have been seen as part of the market, while broadcasting has been regulated in order to achieve at least some of these goals. Recently, however, there has apparently been a revolution in official thinking about the media. It has been argued that broadcasting ought also to be managed by market rather than official forces. The state is now seen by some as having a dead hand, and regulation as being an impediment to innovation.

Nevertheless, however loudly the discussions of the 1980s were carried on in terms of ‘liberating’ or removing official constraints, one basic point was clear. You cannot reform by doing nothing. A government policy which sought to make changes was interventionist even when it claimed not to be.

The 1980s were the ‘me’ decade. Political, economic, and social revival were supposed to be led by the individual’s pursuit of self-interest. Nowhere was this new principle in public life more dominant than in thinking about the media. The ‘individuals’ whose self-interest was particularly valued were the existing media barons. In the new age, entrepreneurs seeking to maximize their own profit were more likely, it was claimed, to produce a broadcasting service genuinely sensitive to what audiences – customers – wanted. A decade of reform was intended to make broadcasting just like the newspapers.

Thus the reorganization of broadcasting services proposed by the 1990 Broadcasting Act and the management of the introduction of new media services were all based on the rhetoric of dismantling regulation. The contradictions between public thinking about the press and broadcasting were to be finally resolved: the market was to reign.

However, as Samuel Brittan has pointed out, the ‘radical’ reformers of the 1980s were less bold in their actions than their words. They were too timid to let the public express its taste: in case it liked what they thought was bad for it. A free market agenda was combined, in practice, with more active censorship. New controls were introduced in the 1980s and 1990s designed to protect public morality and national security from media subversion. Beneath the veneer of market reforms, there remained also a resilient consensus in favour of public service broadcasting. This consensus undermined the drive to marketize television and radio. As a consequence many of the structures and practices of public service broadcasting survived, at least in some form.

Policy consistency was thus not secured on the basis of libertarian market reform. The organization of broadcasting was not brought into line with that of the press, and state controls were not withdrawn. What was imposed in the 1980s and 1990s was merely another layer of piecemeal reform. It added to, rather than detracted from, the confusion at the heart of British media policy.

### **Efficiency**

This confusion has survived repeated attempts to inject order and clarity. Indeed, superficially, official reports on media industries over the last sixty years appear to have much in common. One recurrent theme has been the emphasis on greater efficiency. Thus in 1949 the Gater Report on the British Film Industry called for more effective financial planning, while the second (1962) Press Commission urged that better machinery for negotiation should be established, a point also stressed by the Prices and Incomes Board Report on the press in 1967. In the same way the Annan Report (1977) concluded that ‘clear lines of decision making, fewer chieftains, better communications’ were the most important remedies and the Peacock Report on the BBC (1986) argued that ‘the assessment of efficiency is one of our Committee’s chief aims’. Such comments, few of which have ever had any significant effect, have become part of the ritual of investigation.

Most government reports have also taken an optimistic view of the independence of journalists and programme-makers, and their capacity for autonomous reform. Thus two Royal Commissions on the press have stressed in identical words that ‘on the quality of the individual journalist depends not only the status of the whole profession of journalism but the possibility of bridging the gap between what society needs from the press and what the press is at present giving it’. Similarly, the Annan Report argued that ‘the strength of British broadcasting lies in the creativity of people who make programmes’.

Hence successive reports have suggested better recruitment policies, improved training and education, and greater integrity and responsibility amongst communicators as the best ways to improve the media. Annan proposed an Open Broadcasting Authority which would

show programmes made by ‘small independent production groups’, a term which is reminiscent of the ‘small independent producer’ which film policy has been unsuccessfully trying to help since the Moyne Report in 1936. In the same way, three Royal Commissions put their faith in individual entrepreneurs as the best way of sustaining a varied press. Even the Calcutt Report (1990) on privacy suggested that newspaper ethics depended ‘on the calibre of the individual conscience’ – a somewhat narrow view of the causes of tabloid exploitation.

This emphasis on individuals has resulted in economic and institutional constraints being neglected. Thus for many years public money was used in an attempt to finance independent film producers. Yet, because there was no reform of the organization of film distribution and exhibition, this money merely increased the profits of the large production companies. Public finance reinforced those monopolistic tendencies within the film industry which it had been intended to mitigate. Similarly, the Annan Committee proposed an Open Broadcasting Authority (Channel 4, as it became known) to introduce more adventurous minority programmes, yet failed to suggest how its finance could be arranged to protect it from the economic pressures which inhibited experimental programming on the other channels. In the event, an ingenious cross-subsidy scheme was introduced which insulated Channel 4 from conformist market pressure, but this owed nothing to Annan’s vague advice on funding. The one notable exception to this other-worldly pattern was the Peacock Committee. Though appointed by a government hostile to the BBC, it nevertheless protected the BBC because for the first time its main object was to consider the financial structures that underlay cultural considerations. If the BBC was funded by advertising, Peacock warned, the result would be reduced choice and worse programmes.

This general lack of concern with underlying economic and market structures occasionally had positive outcomes, though more by accident than design. When the Annan Committee recommended a minority television channel, it did not anticipate that this would provide a shot in the arm of the ailing film industry. By giving individual one-off, British art movies a secure, predictable audience on television, Channel 4 improved film-makers’ capacity to raise film finance. By offering an additional distribution system, Channel 4 also gave new opportunities for people to see the work of a network of creative and important film-makers. However, this failed to solve the financial crisis of British film-making. In other European countries where film industries have been relatively more successful, state finance has been more readily available – a critical factor in artistic and commercial success.

Thus, official media reports retained a number of basic assumptions over the years, glossing over problems which their recommendations failed to solve. Yet the essential conservatism of official policy was less important than its contradictions. Good policy is not necessarily consistent policy, but one of the most curious features of government relations with the media has been the way in which reports on the press, broadcasting, and film industries have often conflicted sharply with one another.

### **State as threat**

A common feature of much official thinking about the working of the media has been a liberal suspicion of the state. However, this suspicion assumed such extreme proportions in the case of successive Royal Commissions on the press that it led them into an implicit confrontation with other media enquiries.

Thus, the last Royal Commission on the Press (1977) advanced a sweeping definition of what was acceptable:

We are strongly against any scheme which would make the press, or any section of it, dependent on government through reliance on continuing subsidies from public funds. We are also opposed absolutely to the establishment of any body which could, or might have to, discriminate among publications in such a way as to amount to censorship in the sense of preferring to support some publications and not others.

This view was echoed explicitly by the second Press Commission (1962), and implicitly by the first (1949). Subsidies targeted towards weak publications were rejected on the grounds that they could lead to government manipulation. Yet non-selective subsidies were repudiated because they failed to offer special help to the vulnerable. The first approach was found wanting because it might lead to censorship, the second because it was ineffectual. This Catch 22 formulation in effect ruled out most forms of market intervention.

Yet the dangers that successive public enquiries into the press detected in allocating public resources have seemed less of a problem in other sectors of the media. 'No public body', thundered the third Press Commission, 'should ever be put in a position of discriminating like a censor between one applicant and another.' Yet this is exactly what the Independent Broadcasting Authority, among other public agencies, did when this advice was given. It is what the Independent Television Commission, Radio Authority, British Screen Finance, and Arts Council (whose grants include small publications) does now. The processes of public selection that press enquiries, steeped in a tradition of anti-statism, found so alarming are in fact common practice.

Much the same applies to their objection to policies that could lead to state dependence. If this precept was introduced into the broadcasting sector, it would lead to the immediate privatization of the BBC and Channel 4, the deregulation of all channels, and the free trading of their shares on the open market. In this way, broadcasting could be weaned from the state and be made subject only to the law of the land, like the press. Yet, not even the most right-wing broadcasting enquiry – chaired by Sir Alan Peacock – has been willing to go this far in the short term.

Press Commissions' negative view of the state contrasts with their positive view of the market. This is seen as the sheet-anchor of press independence, a view that coloured their

view of market processes in general. Having rejected public subsidies that induce economic dependence or involve a process of choice, they perceived no difficulty in another kind of subsidy – advertising – that induces economic dependence, involves a process of choice and indeed tends to favour Conservative papers because of their affluent readerships. In the Commissions' view, public subsidies are fraught with dangers: private ones are not. Similarly, successive Press Commissions failed to make the connection between the high costs of market entry and the predominantly right-wing character of the national press. To have done so would have meant questioning their idealized view of the market as neutral, in contrast to the partiality they perceived to be lurking in the actions of state-linked agencies.

### **Benign state**

By contrast, public reports on broadcasting generally view the state in a more positive light. Conservative paternalism and an Arnoldian concern with moral and cultural values originally contributed to this view. A corporatist tradition also played a part, equating central planning with the rational and scientific use of resources, as did a radical belief in the redistribution of resources and power through state intervention. Broadcasting was also viewed as being so powerful an influence that it needed to be harnessed to the general good.

All the nine major reports on British broadcasting argued that a publicly appointed agency could act in the public interest, because it could be independent of all sectional interests, including that of the government. As the Crawford Committee (1926) put it, 'the actual commission should be persons of judgement and independence, free of commitments, and . . . they will inspire confidence by having no other interests to promote than those of public service.'

Broadcasting has been repeatedly presented in reports as serving the public interest as a consequence of being subject to regulations framed for the public good and controlled by people committed to the best interests of the entire community. The BBC was financed from licence revenue and was therefore, in the words of the Pilkington Report (1962), under 'no obligation, express or implied, to pursue any other objective other than that of public service'. Public regulation was seen as both necessary and desirable even after the introduction of commercial television.

This conception of state-sponsored public service has depended on a number of principles. First, that broadcasting services should be made available to everyone in the UK, and not merely developed in areas where it was easy or cheap to do so, or restricted to those who could pay for them. Second, public service broadcasting should produce a wide variety of high-quality programmes because it is not controlled by the forces that make for low standards and uniformity. Finally, that public regulations should ensure broadcasters' accountability through the relationship of the broadcasting authority with parliament.

Whereas press enquiries are in general pro-market, the opposite is generally the case with broadcasting enquiries. Indeed, public service is deemed necessary in order to make up for the deficiencies of free enterprise. The Crawford Committee (1926) argued that 'no company or body constituted on trade lines for profit . . . can be regarded as adequate . . . in view of the broader considerations which now begin to emerge.' The Ullswater Committee (1936) regarded commercial advertising as incompatible with 'the intellectual and ethical integrity which the broadcasting system in this country has attained'. Much of this opposition has been based on the belief that what the Beveridge Committee (1951) called 'competition for numbers' results in standardized programming. This view has been justified by references to the deplorable condition of commercial broadcasting in the USA. 'Experience in other countries', concluded the Pilkington Report in 1962, 'is that this kind of competition, so far from promoting the purposes of broadcasting, or extending the range of programmes, or helping to realise the potential of the medium, serves rather to restrict them.'

The necessity of extensive public regulation was never questioned in official reports on television or radio until the Thatcherite era. There were signs of unease before that, most notably a concern about the relationship between government (and in particular party politicians) and broadcasting. But this gave rise to reform, not repudiation, of the public service system. There was also a gradual weakening of the sense of cultural purpose associated with Lord Reith. As the Annan Report commented, 'the ideals of middle-class culture, so felicitously expressed by Matthew Arnold a century ago . . . found it ever more difficult to accommodate . . . the variety of expression of what is good'. The Annan Committee found it harder to define what 'good' broadcasting was than did Pilkington. Nevertheless, Annan did make qualitative judgements, finding the BBC's output, on balance, superior to that of ITV. Annan was opposed to the unrestricted commercial control of broadcasting, and saw the fact that ITV made 'some programmes which both stimulate and entertain, and are not concocted in order to drug their audience into an uncritical stupor' as a product of public regulation. Even the Peacock Committee, which in certain important respects broke with the broadcasting consensus, nevertheless clung to a conception of public service broadcasting as 'a commitment to produce a wide range of high quality programmes to maximise consumer appreciation'. The current system of collective provision and commercial controls was producing in its judgement a 'mixed diet' of programmes 'at a low cost' that 'has broadened the horizon of a great number of viewers'. While it favoured long-term deregulation, it still made the case for a core public service system which would secure 'programmes of merit which would not survive in a market where audience ratings was the sole criterion'. These were, it added, not just minority programmes but included ones that attract 'medium sized audiences of which virtually all the population at some stage form a part.'

Broadcasting and press reports do not each constitute a single unity. The second Press Commission was more critical of the market than other Press Commissions, while the Peacock Committee was more anti-statist than the broadcasting enquiries that had preceded it. But in general broadcasting policy has been framed within a pro-state, anti-market framework, while press policy has been formulated within an opposed framework that is anti-state and pro-market. This has produced recurrent inconsistencies that cannot be explained away in terms of technological differences between the two media. For example, the idea that government should give money to a publishing corporation, even one with a publicly appointed managing authority, would have been anathema to all Press Commissions who could not countenance even selective subsidies. Yet, this is what the Annan Committee proposed when it suggested that a government grant could be given to start an Open Broadcasting Authority, and what the Peacock Committee recommended in effect when it suggested that a Public Service Broadcasting Council could be financed by the taxpayer.

### **Government and lame ducks**

Government intervention has sometimes been justified as an exceptional measure that will make subsequent interference unnecessary and restore a stable and competitive market. This has been particularly true of British film policy which has been shaped by a combination of crisis-driven expediency and unfulfilled optimism. Thus in 1927 a Board of Trade inquiry into the film industry advocated special measures to deal with 'unfair, devious and improper trading' by American competitors. This report resulted in the Cinematograph Act, 1927, which obliged distributors and exhibitors to purchase and show quotas of British films. But this was intended to be only a short-term measure, to promote 'free and equitable trade'. In 1949 the National Film Finance Corporation was set up to provide loans for film production. It was seen as a response to a temporary inability of British film producers to obtain private investment capital. The Eady Levy, introduced during the same period, was designed to promote national film production through a tax on box office takings which was supposed to fall most heavily on successful foreign imports. Similarly, the last Royal Commission on the press also recommended that newspapers should be offered cheap loans in order to pay for the introduction of new printing technology during a period of financial crisis. Its advice was sensibly ignored.

Most of these measures, though advocated as temporary expedients, became settled features of public policy. The 'temporary' import quota introduced in 1927 was strengthened in 1938, supplemented during the 1940s, and abandoned only in 1983. The National Film Finance Corporation, set up as a self-financing agency, was forced to write off many loans and so became a continuing source of state finance for the film industry. It was closed in 1986,



and replaced by the ineffective, 'private' enterprise, British Screen Finance, aided by a small government grant. The Eady Levy survived until 1984 even though it reinforced American domination of the British film industry by subsidizing American-backed films which were only nominally British. The rationale for the levy had changed, and it came to be seen as a way of maintaining employment rather than supporting national culture. All these one-off interventions proved more long-lasting or served different purposes than were originally intended. They might all have been more successful if they had been designed to meet long-term problems rather than short-term crises.

### Variety in policy goals

Media policy has not only been shaped by different philosophies, and by *ad hoc* responses to particular crises. It has also been directed towards different objectives in a way that is partly unplanned and unco-ordinated. Thus, broadcasting regulation has long sought to preserve a space for national collective expression. As late as the 1970s, no more than 14 per cent of television programmes on BBC or ITV was allowed to be foreign (excluding Commonwealth countries). 'Foreign' was changed to mean non-EEC countries in the 1981 Broadcasting Act, but strict rationing of foreign programmes continued. The foreign allowance was raised to 35 per cent of Channel 3 programmes in 1993 by the Independent Television Authority, and the same proviso was later adopted for Channel 5. This protectionist policy was backed up by limitations on foreign ownership and investment in broadcasting. Even to this day, non-EU corporations are not allowed to acquire Channel 3 and 5 companies, though the restriction on majority holding of cable TV companies was lifted in 1990, and that on new multiplex, digital enterprises was waived in 1996.

But what has been thought desirable in television and radio has not been deemed important in the press. There has never been any restriction on foreign ownership of British newspapers. Official enquiries into the press, unlike those into broadcasting, have never seen this as an issue. In film policy, by contrast, cultural autonomy has been thought important but it has been eclipsed as an objective by the need to sustain a film industry underwritten by American money. This was tacitly acknowledged by the 1968 review of film legislation when it argued that the National Film Finance Corporation should be maintained not to defend British cultural production but because 'it constitutes a real attraction for foreign investment'.

The competing claims of the economy, 'culture', and the political system are negotiated in media policy, and resolved in divergent ways in different industries. In film policy, priority has come to be given to maintaining jobs; in television, more attention has been given to cultural concerns. This has resulted in films being conceived and regulated in quite different ways, depending upon whether they are watched in the cinema, on video, or on 'live' television.

In the case of television, resources have been redistributed in order to promote quality and diversity. Thus, the obligation imposed by the ITC on Channel 3 companies to provide a mixed schedule ensures that some of the revenue generated by programmes (including films) reaching large audiences is invested in more demanding or more minority-oriented programmes watched by smaller audiences. Yet the same principle was never applied to the allocation of film funds through the Eady Levy. This tax on cinema takings was paid to production companies in proportion to the box office revenue for their films. It constituted a bounty distributed according to market demand. 'The levy', concluded the 1968 Board of Trade review, 'should not be used to breed indifference to economic reality.' Underlying this argument was a concern that cultural or qualitative concerns should not encroach upon market efficiency and the survival of British film-making. By contrast, there never has been a policy in relation to videos apart from a prohibition against objectionable sex or violence.

### **Divergent histories**

Differences of perspective are rooted partly in different histories. Royal Commissions on the press have always largely ignored the bulk of what is printed in national newspapers – its human interest, sports, and entertainment content – preferring to concentrate instead on its public affairs coverage. Their main concern has been with the role of the press within the democratic system, and their proposals have been framed mainly with this in mind. In contrast, broadcasting enquiries have considered the whole range of broadcasting. They have discussed the role of television and radio in wider social and cultural terms, and their recommendations have been intended to improve the general quality of programmes.

This difference of approach derives from the different histories of the two media. The press has been understood in terms of its origins and development as a purveyor of news and central agency of democracy. It has been analysed in terms of the 'politics of information' with a well-defined set of questions and concerns that go back to the seventeenth century. In contrast, radio was first discussed in policy reports when it was primarily a channel of culture and entertainment, and when it had minimal coverage of public affairs due to restrictive regulations. It was defined in terms of the 'politics of culture', with a different set of questions and concerns also going back in time.

These different histories have left their imprint on policy making. Press reports have worried about concentration, control, and responsibility in news reporting. Broadcasting reports have been mainly exercised about the quality and variety of cultural expression. Different perspectives have led to divergent or incommensurate conclusions. Thus in 1962 the Pilkington Committee recommended a ban on television advertisements 'appealing to human weakness'. Yet two years later the Royal Commission on the press did not even

consider the content of newspaper and magazine advertising, let alone recommend its reform. Similarly, the Annan Committee recommended that the joint ownership of commercial broadcasting companies and record or music publishing companies be banned, on the grounds that there was bound to be a conflict of interest between them. The third Royal Commission on the press, also reporting in 1977, did not propose (or even discuss) a similar measure in relation to the music press and record production.

These discrepancies merely illustrate the different intellectual frameworks in which press and broadcasting policy are conceived. However, these frameworks no longer make sense. The popular press has become increasingly depoliticized, and only a small fraction of its editorial content – less than 20 per cent – has anything to do with public affairs. In contrast, television and radio now carry a much larger volume of news and analysis than before. Indeed, television has largely eclipsed the press as the main source of political information. The distinction between media of ‘information’ and those of ‘culture and entertainment’ have completely broken down. Hence, the different policy approaches which have been developed to deal with broadcasting and the press are completely inadequate.

### **Pressure groups and policy**

Another source of inconsistency in media policy derives from the fact that it is shaped by public enquiries confined to one media industry. These have not been given common terms of reference, and they have not been set to work within an integrated framework of communications policy.

The inevitable consequence has been that public enquiries have responded to the divergent pressure groups and economic interests at work in different media industries. To take but one example, the 1977 Press Commission favoured limited press holdings in profitable television and radio franchises because, following press lobbying, it came round to the view that these were a valuable, potential source of cross-subsidy for vulnerable newspapers. Similarly the Prime Minister’s Working Party on the Film Industry (1977), closely influenced by the views of the industry, proposed that television should finance film-making. On the other hand, the Annan Committee (1977) was exposed to broadcasters who were hostile to the idea that broadcasting should subsidize less profitable media. It consequently opposed the view that ‘like an aged parent, the film industry has a right to look to television to support it in its old age’. It rejected the proposal (already endorsed by the Working Party on the Film Industry) for money for film investment to come out of the television levy. It also differed from the Press Commission in being more hostile to cross-ownership between press and broadcasting.

A second consequence of the unco-ordinated way in which communications policy has evolved is that reforms have been proposed and implemented for one industry, which have

then had unforeseen consequences for other media. For example, the decision to establish commercial television in 1955–6, in the wake of Selwyn Lloyd's minority report, almost certainly contributed to the epidemic of newspaper and magazine closures that the second Press Commission was then appointed in 1961 to investigate.

### **Need for an integrated approach**

Of course, a degree of variation in approach to different media could reasonably be justified in terms of their contrasting characteristics. But, in practice, differences of media policy are rooted in the histories of different industries and have evolved in a piecemeal way. They are not the product of rational differentiation between media within the framework of an integrated plan.

However, it seemed in the 1980s and early 1990s as if a greater measure of policy consistency would emerge. The New Right had a homogenizing project – to 'set the media free' by making them all privately owned within a market economy – and the ear of pro-market administrations. An industrial logic also pointed towards a more uniform approach. The growing convergence of the technologies of television, publishing, and telecommunications seemed likely to encourage policy makers to view the communications industry as a whole rather than as separate industries. The growth of media conglomerates also encouraged industrial interests to operate in a more unified way, as was demonstrated when the Media Industry Group was formed in the early 1990s to oppose restrictions on cross-media ownership. And in 1992, the Department of National Heritage – a media and culture ministry in all but name – came into being. It was intended to introduce a new degree of rationality and coherence in public administration.

This is not how things turned out. In fact, the voice of the media industry continued to be divided, most notably between public and private enterprises. The new Department of National Heritage had still to consult and negotiate with other parts of government – the Cabinet Office, Treasury, Lord Chancellor's Office and Department of Trade among others – over media policy whose formation tended to be fraught and strongly influenced by short-term pragmatic considerations. By 1996, there were also over a dozen regulatory agencies with responsibility for different aspects of the functioning of the communications industries – a bureaucratic muddle largely inherited from the past which added to the confusion.

But the key reason why nothing fundamentally changed was because coherence was not imposed in the end by the external political environment. As we shall see, the New Right was divided between libertarians and paternalists, gradualists and fundamentalists, and could not agree on what they wanted. They were also defeated in the country, in the broadcasting community, in the Conservative Party, and in the Cabinet by supporters of public service broadcasting. Consequently, many of their pro-market initiatives ran into the sand.

During the 1980s and 1990s the broadcasting system became more market-oriented. But it did not become, like the press, subordinated to the market. The BBC and Channel 4 were not privatized. Channel 3 was not relieved of its public service obligations: its companies still had to be impartial, informative, and concerned with quality. Even the crowning glory of radical right reform – the establishment in 1990 of a ‘light touch’ regulator, the Independent Television Commission (ITC), to oversee the unprecedented auction of Channel 3 franchises – failed to live up to pro-market expectations. The ITC ‘sabotaged’ the auction by excluding fourteen applicants from bidding, and by later rejecting three of the highest bidders, on quality grounds. Although deprived of direct control over schedules, the new regulatory agency was given an arsenal of new powers, including the right to shorten franchises and to fine. Public warnings issued to under-performing television companies indicated moreover its willingness to use these powers. In short, the contradiction at the heart of the British media system between the press and broadcasting, between deregulated private enterprise and public service forms of organization, remained.

Indeed, a shift in the 1990s indicated the possibility of a different kind of policy resolution: a concerted shift towards responsible regulation, and away from spurious market freedom. Newspapers’ exploitation of individual tragedy, extravagant lies, and persecution of scapegoats gave rise to a groundswell in favour of reform. Two enquiries, both headed by the lawyer Sir David Calcutt, were appointed in response to this clamour. At the same time, support for the marketization of broadcasting weakened. It became possible to ask that broadcasting organizations be not only more ‘popular’ or more internationally competitive, but also better.

In this context, when new opportunities for positive change are perhaps opening up, what might be accomplished? Set out in the next chapter are the range of policy options available.

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*Palette of policies*

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**Introduction**

Public policy about the media is often presented as an arcane subject concerned with regulators, markets, and ‘externalities’. It seems to belong to a rarified world where only experts are qualified to speak, and where the issues involved are susceptible solely to technocratic solutions.

But in essence the debate about how best to organize and manage the mass media is exceedingly simple. It also involves strategic choices about the deployment of important sources of pleasure, information, power, and wealth creation. These choices affect everyone: they are not something that can be left to specialists to determine.

What follows is a summary of public discussion about mass communications policy. It reports not simply the main policy options but crucially the thinking behind them. The aim is to provide a map that clearly marks the main points of entry into democratic debate, rather than an exhaustive shopping list of reforms.

Policy discussion about media organization is dominated by the debate between advocates of the free market and public service. One side calls for the media to be free of regulation other than the law of the land. The other sings the praises of the British broadcasting system, and declares it to be the best in the world. Between these two polarities of market radicalism and public service complacency are a number of different positions which we shall explore. They tend to be associated, however, with either a market or public service tradition (see Table 8).

There is also another discussion concerned specifically with media law. Here, the main split is between paternalists who want society to be protected from irresponsible media, and libertarians who emphasize the need to defend free expression. This second division cuts across the first, producing strange bedfellows. Some want the media to be deregulated in the economic sphere but subject to severe legal restriction. Others reverse this, wanting extensive economic intervention combined with weak legal regulation. Others, too, are consistent

Table 8 *Alternative approaches to media organization*

	<i>Traditional public service</i>	<i>Free market</i>
Media role	Inform, educate, integrate, and entertain	Satisfy customer
Organization	Public corporation/ independent regulator	Private enterprise
Broadcasting reform	Reverse recent policy changes	Abolish BBC and regulatory authorities
Press reform	Regulate newspaper franchises	Status quo

libertarians, wanting the minimum of state involvement in the media in any form. The result is a complex configuration of policy positions, which can be viewed at a glance in Figure 1 on page 354.

For the sake of expository clarity, we will consider first the division between advocates of the free market and public service, before considering that between legal paternalists and libertarians. Only then will we try to piece the two together.

### Free market

The starting point of the free market approach is that consumers are the best judges of what is in their own interests. Media policy should be geared therefore to creating the conditions of greatest possible competition in which consumers exercise sovereign control. This produces a system that gives people what they want; a diverse output to choose from; and media that are independent of government. There is no conflict between the needs of society and the functioning of the market system. 'All provision for the consumer on a competitive basis in a non-distorted market', writes the *Financial Times* journalist, Samuel Brittan, 'is a *public service*' (emphasis added).

Most neo-liberals see little need for institutional reform of the press since it is organized on free market lines. When challenged by evidence of market failure, they usually emphasize the way in which competition has been increased by new technology, and argue that any state-sponsored cure will be worse than the ill it is intended to remedy.

But while free market supporters are generally conservative in relation to the press, they are usually radicals when it comes to broadcasting. Public service broadcasting organizations are condemned on three main counts. They are controlled by an unrepresentative élite who foist their cultural values on the public; they are vulnerable to government pressure because

<i>Social market</i>	<i>Radical public service</i>
Serve consumer and citizen	Free and open dialogue/ cultural democracy
Private enterprise/ public intervention	Staff/pluralistic control
Phased-in deregulation	Independence from government/ wider social access
Targeted subsidies	Public trusts

they are dependent on state-sponsored privileges; and they are bureaucratic prone to waste and profligacy. According to some critics, organizations like the BBC are also unaccountable havens for radicals. This is in marked contrast to the competitive environment of the press where the consumer is in control and where, consequently, unpopular radical views get short shrift.

The case for deregulation, argue neo-liberals, has been further reinforced by technological innovation. It used to be maintained plausibly that broadcasting channels had to be managed in the public interest because the scarcity of airwave frequencies produced a natural oligopoly. But fibre-optic cable, satellite, and digital broadcasting are multiplying the number of television channels, and these are being supplemented by video, CD-Rom productions, the Internet, and other on-line services. The traditional consensual justification for public service broadcasting, based on spectrum scarcity, no longer applies in an era of media plenty.

At this point the clear line of neo-liberal argument can become clouded by internal debate between fundamentalists and revisionists. Fundamentalists believe that broadcasting should be deregulated immediately. Thus, the Adam Smith Institute argues that the BBC should be broken up into ‘an association of independent and separately financed stations’ funded partly by advertising. ‘The only fair criterion of judging a programme is by how many people like it’, which is why the market should decide.<sup>1</sup> True believers also favour the immediate release of commercial broadcasting from irksome regulation.

The current curbs on cross-media ownership should be thrown on to this bonfire of red tape. What Andrew Knight calls ‘the explosion of choice’ has made redundant old-fashioned concerns about media monopoly. Cross-media ownership should be positively welcomed rather than resisted since it encourages investment and is, in Rupert Murdoch’s phrase, ‘a force for diversity’.<sup>2</sup> Media concentration is also now essential for economic success in the increasingly global communications market.



However, proposals for an immediate and total overhaul of the existing system have given rise to misgivings among liberal revisionists for two main reasons. Dismantling monopoly controls may weaken, in their view, competition by leading to market domination by a few mega-corporations. The more theoretically oriented among them are also concerned that broadcasting does not constitute a normal industry subject to conventional market disciplines, and are wary about fast-track deregulation.

Their concern stems partly from the fact that broadcasting has what welfare economists call 'public good' characteristics. Programmes can be enjoyed by more than one person without diminishing their use or enjoyment: they are not like a bar of chocolate which, once eaten, is unavailable to others. Programmes can also be consumed by more people without any additional cost. This then raises the question of why this natural public good should be marketized, and why people should be excluded by price when they could be served at no extra cost.

Revisionist neo-liberals' other concern is that television advertising is insensitive to intensities of demand. This creates an economic incentive to increase the number of television viewers rather than raise the level of programme satisfaction. Within an advertising-funded system, high rating programmes are said to crowd out highly rated ones.

The revisionist answer is to develop a pluralistic system of funding based on subscription television, pay-TV (i.e. payment for specific programmes), and advertising finance, which will overcome the shortcomings of any single payment scheme. When consumers are free to pay for what they particularly like, both programme investment and minority choice will increase. At the same time, the retention of an advertising-based, 'free' television service will ensure that consumers are not excluded by price from a public good. The other strand of this argument is that a 'mature', competitive market should be secured through the establishment of a nation-wide, fibre-optic cable grid. This should be constituted, it is sometimes argued, as a two-way 'common carrier' system permitting television producers to transmit any programme on payment of a transmission fee, and enabling viewers to summon any programme on payment of a charge. In this way, the viewer can schedule according to personal taste, and the programme-maker can have unprecedented creative freedom.

The ultimate neo-liberal alternative to public service broadcasting is thus presented as being the 'perfect market' in which no provider is dominant and the viewer has a wide choice. However, this idyll is proving more elusive than some liberals originally anticipated. Technophiles like Peter Jay argued in the mid-1970s that 'electronic publishing', based on an open national cable system, lay just round the corner. A national cable system has since been sloganized as an 'information highway', but still remains a distant prospect. In 1996, only 6.4 million households were within reach of cable in the UK and of these, a mere 22 per cent chose to subscribe to cable television services. While cable television has also been supplemented by satellite television, both accounted in early 1996 for no more than 8 per cent of total

television viewing. VCRs and video rentals have extended choice, and the personal computer potentially opens up a cornucopia of services. Yet in September 1994, only one in seven UK households owned a PC.

We are living through a communications evolution rather than revolution.<sup>3</sup> This has prompted some liberal revisionists to become advocates of gradual deregulation. At key points in the 1980s and 1990s, they sided with the public service ‘enemy’. However, their thinking is best examined more fully later, under the heading of the ‘social market’.

### **Traditional public service**

Public service traditionalists approach the media from a different starting point to that of market liberals. Although this has been covered elsewhere in this book, it may be helpful here to summarize the current version of their argument. Traditionalists hold that the role of broadcasting is not merely to satisfy – or gratify (a favourite, sniffy word) – consumer demand. Broadcasting has also important political, social, and cultural functions which are best fulfilled within a public service framework.

Public service broadcasting is committed to reporting the news impartially, and giving due prominence to coverage of public affairs. It thus ensures that people are properly briefed to exercise their rights and obligations as citizens, and contributes to the healthy functioning of the democratic system. In contrast, market-driven media tend to shrink news in favour of entertainment, offer ‘infotainment’ instead of informative analysis, and follow private, partisan agendas. Compare, argue public service advocates, the quality of BBC’s or ITN’s news service with that of the ‘bingo-jingo’ tabloids.

Second, public service broadcasting maintains high programme standards and contributes to the cultural resources of society, rather than merely offering what is profitable. It seeks to democratize culture by making widely available the best works of literature, drama, art, and music. It aims to renew and develop cultural tradition by supporting innovation and experiment. Above all, it is committed to catering for the diversity of the public, the enthusiasms of minorities, as well as of the majority. It responds to the breadth of public taste rather than its lowest common denominator.

Third, public service broadcasting is preferable because it is best at binding together and integrating an increasingly privatized society. It ensures that everyone has access to a shared, unifying experience, because it does not discriminate against outlying areas or low income groups on the grounds of cost or profitability. Its approach is inclusive, seeking to draw together society in its diversity and to frame public discussion in terms of what serves the general good. And because it invests in making programmes rather than relying (like BSKyB)

on cheap imports, it maintains a cultural space through which society can express itself and define its collective identity.

Underlying this public service approach is a view that stresses the merits of social cohesion and mutual obligation in contrast to a neo-liberal perspective of contracting and exchanging individuals. The public service approach emphasizes the need to offset the growing atomization of society, whereas market liberalism places the individual at the centre, and constructs broadcasting as a system responding to individual choice. More generally, the traditional public service approach is imbued with the ethos of the public service class, with its notions of disinterested professionalism, rational public discourse determined by the public good, and a hierarchy of cultural value determined by the test of time. The neo-liberal approach, by contrast, derives from a capitalist tradition which argues that dedication to profit produces outcomes that are in the interests of all due to the hidden hand of the free market. As for culture, it assumes that one person's brass is as good as another's. The debate between the two traditions is thus not merely about the respective merits of alternative media systems. It also reflects a wider conflict of values and understandings.

In this clash, traditional supporters of public service feel increasingly beleaguered. They argue that the British broadcasting system achieved an enviable ecological balance based on regulated competition, organizational pluralism, and producer power. It was a system carefully crafted over time through a succession of wise, pragmatic decisions, which, they argue, is now being recklessly destroyed in the name of untested management theory and market ideology.

Their exaltation of the British system is based partly on its perceived superiority to foreign alternatives. On the one hand, American television is said to produce 'wall-to-wall Dallas', a low-calorie diet of undemanding programmes dictated by the imperatives of a market system. On the other hand, politicized public service systems such as those in Germany or The Netherlands have party or special interest appointees on their boards who demand the production of worthy but dull programmes. What distinguishes the British public service approach, based originally on an independent civil service model, is that it gives its staff more autonomy than market-driven or representative-ridden alternatives. However, the hidden strength of this system – the relative creative freedom it allows its staff, particularly at producer level – is being undermined by increasing centralization both in the BBC and the Channel 3 companies.

A key feature of this traditionalist argument, now, is that it embraces not only the BBC – once the sole locus of public service loyalty – but also Channel 4 and regulated commercial broadcasting. It celebrates what it sees as the pluralism at the heart of British broadcasting arising from the differently organized structures that comprise it. It also argues that the

system once achieved a perfectly balanced and creative pattern of interaction. In the golden age of British broadcasting, the BBC competed for viewers against ITV in order to safeguard its public funding, while ITV companies competed in quality against the BBC in order to secure their franchise renewal. In this way, goes the argument, the BBC was rescued from Reithian paternalism, and ITV was shielded from crass commercialism. However, competition was beneficial only because it was regulated. The two organizations were rivals for audience time but not for revenue in order to encourage differentiation. This creative synergy was further enhanced by the addition of an 'alternative' minority channel, Channel 4, challenging the BBC's more mainstream minority channel, BBC2.

Changes in the 1990s destabilized this system. These changes included the auctioning of television franchises; the replacement of the interventionist Independent Broadcasting Authority with the 'light touch' Independent Television Commission and Radio Authority; the introduction of direct advertising on Channel 4; the establishment of national commercial radio channels; the proliferation of little regulated satellite and cable television channels; the BBC's development of a private enterprise wing; the rise of an overpopulated independent production sector, hungry for commissions; and the arrival of Channel 5 competing against Channel 3 for a mass audience. Their cumulative effect was to destroy the delicate balance between commerce and public service by weakening the public service element and strengthening commercialism.

Yet if traditionalists felt the ground moving under their feet, the structures they occupied mostly survived. Their top priority has become to save the BBC, both in terms of its soul and its future, if necessary in opposition to the people who run it. To this end, they angrily attacked a mooted plan to make the BBC more highbrow, sensing that this would endanger its popular support. Rather than securing a niche for its future as a source of programmes that the market system could not deliver, it would lead to its exile to 'a so-called high ground . . . inhabited only by the sound of cow-bells'.<sup>4</sup> They defended with persuasive passion the licence fee as the cornerstone of the BBC's independence, insulating it both from government and market pressure. The television license could still be justified, they argued, in an age of digital television, narrowcasting and video-on-demand, providing that the BBC continued to be watched by most households at some point in the week. Should the licence fee be converted into a voluntary subscription, it would fatally undermine the BBC. Some households would opt out – causing the fee to rise, more subscribers to cancel, and a downward spiral of decline. According to the Jonscher Report, there is no level of subscription fee that would match the BBC's funding under the current system.

Also stoutly defended by traditionalists is the Independent Television Commission (ITC). This is, in their view, the equivalent of a joist supporting the public service tradition in the commercial television sector. Its effect has been to increase the level of programme

investment and quality; foster the production of minority programmes; and strengthen the hand of programme-makers within Channel 3 companies.

However, much of the energy of traditionalists has been devoted to placing sandbags against the advancing tide of market liberalism. They have been forced on to the defensive in trying to save the achievements of the past rather than planning with imagination for the future. At heart many are conservationists harking back to a former golden age, fearful of what tomorrow will bring, with few proposals for constructive change.

Yet the tradition they defend remains an inspiration for a small band of public service press reformers. These argue that public service broadcasting is superior to the press, and should be the template for press reform. Thus, Tony Benn has suggested that *The Times* should be purchased for the nation, and run on the same lines as the BBC. Two other Labour MPs, Chris Mullin and Michael Meacher, have advanced alternative plans for franchising newspapers under an Independent Press Authority, modelled on the old Independent Broadcasting Authority. Meacher's plan involves imposing due impartiality rules on existing newspapers, while Mullin's more radical scheme would involve restructuring the press into franchised groups that reflect a plurality of viewpoints. An alternative plan would require newspapers to allocate a set amount of editorial space to certain categories of content (such as public affairs coverage), once they passed specified circulation thresholds. In effect, this is a press adaptation of the ITC system which requires Channel 3 and 5 companies to provide a mixed programme schedule.

### **Social market**

The third significant group in the politics of the media are social market radicals. They are a disparate collection of people, including one-nation Conservatives, New Labour intellectuals, Keynesian reformers, anti-statist socialists, Leavisite neo-liberals, cultural protectionists, and economic modernizers. What they have in common is a positive view of the market combined with the belief that it should be regulated in pursuit of specific public goals.

This group is the wild card in the pack of media politics because it draws support from both left and right. It pressed, for example, in the late 1980s for an independent production quota requiring the BBC and ITV to commission 25 per cent of their programmes from outside producers. The social market right advocated this measure as a way of breaking trade union power, promoting flexible and competitive production, and a culture of free enterprise and freedom. The social market left saw this as a way of weakening hierarchy and corporatism, promoting innovation, and enabling the excluded – including underemployed, former media

studies students – to win a place in the sun. With what seemed like lightning speed, this broad-based lobby got its demands written into the 1990 Broadcasting Act.

The pivotal significance of this group stems also from the way in which it can undermine its natural allies. Thus, social market gradualists weakened the New Right cause during the 1980s. A key document in this respect was the Peacock Committee Report (1986) on financing broadcasting. Its impact derived partly from the unexpected way in which it justified public service broadcasting in right-wing terms as a necessary accommodation to market failure. The best way of securing the benefits of a free market, it argued, in a situation where there is no developed subscription system is to make broadcasting organizations offer a variety of programmes, and fund them from different sources of revenue. In these circumstances, ‘collective provision or regulation of programmes does provide a *better simulation of a market* designed to reflect consumer preferences than a policy of *laissez-faire*’ (emphasis added).

However, the public service system was supported only as a temporary expedient. There should be, Peacock argued, a phased in introduction of a free market. In the first phase, the government should expand the broadcasting system, privatize a bit of it, promote independent production, and initiate the first steps towards deregulation. In the second phase (the ‘later 1990s’), the BBC should be funded by voluntary subscription. In the third and final phase, broadcasting regulation should be abolished. However, even in this final phase, the Committee suggested that there should continue to be a Public Service Broadcasting Council (PSBC) which would foster ‘programmes of a more demanding kind with a high content of knowledge, culture, education and experiment (including entertainment)’ because not enough of these programmes would be generated by a market-driven system. It would give grants to broadcasting organizations for the production of specified worthwhile programmes.

The short-term strategy outlined in the Peacock Report broadly provided the basis for the 1990 Broadcasting Act. However, there were some significant omissions and the gathering impetus towards deregulation in the medium term, anticipated by Peacock, failed to come about. New television sets were not required to be manufactured in a form suitable for pay-TV systems; the BBC’s licence fee was not abolished; a new fall-back agency, the proposed PSBC, was not put in place in order to make acceptable a lurch towards deregulation. In the event, Peacock’s social market report was drawn upon selectively in order to defend rather than to destroy public service broadcasting.

A second key social market document is the Conservative government’s White Paper on *Media Ownership* (1995). It is remarkable partly because of the context in which it was published. Leading media corporations had been pressing for the elimination of media monopoly controls. A faction led by Michael Heseltine had broadly supported their case in Cabinet. Added to this pressure was the ambivalence of the Labour Opposition which had

publicly courted right-wing publishers, and in the end attacked the government from the right, for 'treat[ing] newspaper groups unfairly in their access to broadcasting markets'.<sup>5</sup>

In this cold climate, the one-nation Conservative Heritage Minister, Stephen Dorrell, successfully persuaded his colleagues to retain significant curbs on media concentration. The case for doing so was forcefully expressed in the government's White Paper:

A free and diverse media are an indispensable part of the democratic process. They provide the multiplicity of voices and opinions that informs the public, influences opinion and engenders political debate. They promote the culture of dissent which any democracy must have. In so doing, they contribute to the cultural fabric of the nation and help define our sense of identity and purpose. If one voice becomes too powerful, this process is placed in jeopardy and democracy is damaged. Special media ownership rules . . . are needed therefore to provide safeguards necessary to maintain diversity and plurality.

Media policy should also promote market efficiency. But while the fostering of a successful and competitive media industry was an 'important objective', 'the main objective must . . . be to secure a plurality of sources of information and opinion, and a plurality of editorial control over them'. The needs of democracy must come first.

General competition legislation, the White Paper argued, is not adequate for this purpose. It is framed primarily with economic objectives in mind, and would allow levels of media concentration that would be inappropriate given the media's strategic role in the democratic process. While the expansion in the number of media outlets makes possible some liberalization of controls, specific limits should be placed on the expansion of large media corporations.

The White Paper's proposed curbs on cross-ownership between local press and radio, and on the number of television stations that could be bought, were diluted in response to intensive industrial lobbying when a new Heritage Minister, Virginia Bottomley, framed the 1996 Broadcasting Act. Nevertheless, a highly contentious measure blocking media giants with over 20 per cent of national newspaper circulation (Murdoch's News International and the Mirror Group) from expanding into terrestrial television was retained. A defiant, 'one-nation' pennant had been planted which asserted the right to regulate media markets in the interests of pluralism and democracy.

The social market approach associated with certain new Labour intellectuals<sup>6</sup> is rather similar to this one-nation Conservatism. It argues that the state should intervene in the market to maintain fair competition, protect the consumer and secure basic 'communication entitlements'. This last consideration legitimates quite extensive public intervention, including broadly the current broadcasting status quo. However, it proposes that the BBC

should be restructured in order to establish a clear distinction between its trading and public service activities. A single regulatory agency, Ofcom, should replace also the current 'alphabet soup' and 'feudal muddle' of multiple agencies regulating press, broadcasting, and other communication industries.

This approach sees the state primarily as a public watchdog whose role is to intervene and regulate, where necessary, in order to protect the public. This differs in emphasis from another social market perspective which sees the state primarily as a patron or developer whose role is to foster the media as a source of wealth, jobs, and cultural identity. It is this latter approach which has tended to dominate the European politics of the media, although it is interpreted in significantly different ways.

A number of policy documents issued by the European Commission, as well as by think-tanks and committees with a quasi-formal connection to the Commission, argue that communications is one of the key growth sectors in the European economy capable of generating up to two million new jobs. They also point out that Europe has a large deficit in its audio-visual trade with the US, and is less well positioned than the US to develop new information services. A key issue, therefore, is how the state can help develop a strategic sector of the European economy at a time of increasingly integrated and fierce global competition.

This is linked to the issue of cultural self-determination. Major American producers of television programmes are able to recoup their costs from their large home market, and sell overseas transmission rights for as little as one-twentieth of the cost of making new programmes in Europe. Television production (and film-making) needs to be protected, it is argued, against American competition, and the creeping 'coca-colanization' of European culture. However, this argument is developed in divergent ways. Some want to limit American domination in order to sustain national cultures in Europe; others want to diminish both American and national cultural influence in order to facilitate the growth of a pan-European culture.

In this argument, the European Commission has come down largely on the side of Europeanization on both cultural and economic grounds. 'Only a genuinely European industry', according to a European Commission Green Paper, 'backed by its most powerful players, can be a match for the world's communications giants.'<sup>7</sup> Europe needs to overcome the fragmentation of its communications industry into national markets, and develop continental champions capable of matching the scale economies and financial resources of Hollywood. This would also foster a European cultural identity.

Two different ways of reaching this goal are advocated, however, by rival social market factions. One approach sees the European state as an interventionist agency of modernization and reconstruction. It should set up a European distribution agency for films and television programmes, provide development finance, and support European co-production and the



integration of programme and film catalogues.<sup>8</sup> The other approach sees the European state not as a mover and shaker but as a more disengaged friend of big media enterprise. The European Union should encourage corporate mergers and partnerships as a way of producing European champions. It should also fund training, co-ordinate the standardization of new technology, and pursue an external policy (for example, over international copyright) that furthers European media interests.<sup>9</sup>

The actual policy pursued by the European Union hovers uncertainly between these two approaches. There is a small but growing aid programme intended to assist the reconstruction of the European audio-visual sector. This concentrated initially on the film industry, and took the form of soft loans administered through the European Film Distribution Office. This failed to prevent a further slump in European film-makers' share of the European market. The Media Programme was introduced in 1991, which gave limited support for economic co-operation and the distribution of audio-visual products. This has since been augmented by the Media 2 Programme, which started in 1996 and earmarked \$260 million for encouraging private investment in film and programme production. The net effect of this programme, to date, has been extremely modest.

The European state has also sought to encourage the growth of panEuropean media enterprise by establishing a legal framework that guarantees the free movement of programmes across frontiers in the internal market. This has weakened the attempts of some nation states, like The Netherlands, to protect their public service systems, while at the same time assisting the growth of transnational television enterprises. However, these transnational broadcasters have encouraged, if anything, a process of Americanization rather than of Europeanization because they have tended to transmit cheap American imported programmes. An attempt to secure a concerted restriction on the import of non-European programmes failed since this was made, in effect, optional in the Television Without Frontiers Directive (1989). The European Union has been no more successful in promoting cultural autonomy (if this be thought desirable)<sup>10</sup> than in reconstructing the audio-visual industry.

Rival social market perspectives of the state as watchdog and developer led to friction. This is illustrated by the still unresolved issue of how media concentration should be handled in a European context. The European Parliament demanded watchdog legislation safeguarding media pluralism in resolutions passed in 1990 and 1992. Reforming MEPs believed that the problem of safe havens in which private broadcasters evade national regulation (on issues like diversity and monopoly) by beaming programmes by satellite from another country could only be dealt with effectively by a Directive in which the same legal requirements would be enforced by each member state of the European Union. They also hoped that monopoly controls would be strengthened and harmonized across Western Europe on the basis of best practice.

The response of the European Commission, in its Green Paper and still more in its follow-up, consultative Communication, was to reinterpret the issue of media concentration in terms of economic development.<sup>11</sup> While it paid lip-service to the need to safeguard media pluralism through safety net regulation, it laid much greater stress on market efficiency. In its judgement, disparities between national rules on media ownership fragment Europe's media, subdivide its resources, and deter investment. They stand in the way of transforming Europe's media into a modern and competitive industry. The implication of the Commission's analysis is that media concentration should be encouraged rather than, as MEPs were advocating, curbed. What will result from this tussle between institutions and perspectives will depend upon the position (largely undebated in Britain) taken by national European governments in relation to a Europe-wide initiative in this area.

A modest alternative to the view of the state as an agency of modernization sees it merely as a local repair shop that fixes things when they go wrong. This is the conception that informs numerous schemes for maintaining press diversity advanced in the past by organizations like the Labour Party and the *Guardian* (when it was lobbying the Wilson government to save it from the threat of closure) as well as by reforming academics and journalists. Most of these schemes seek either to transfer income from rich to poor papers or to target public money towards vulnerable publications as a way of sustaining a politically varied press.

Their inspiration comes from the press subsidies scheme in Sweden (with variations in Norway, Finland, and The Netherlands).<sup>12</sup> This takes the form primarily of production grants, fixed in relation to circulation and editorial newsprint, that are awarded to 'low-coverage' newspapers. Radical, neoKeynesian analysis of endemic market failure developed by Karl Erik Gustaffsson legitimizes this scheme. Only a constant drip-feed of selective subsidy is able to offset, he argued, a built in disposition towards monopoly and contraction in dominated newspaper markets.

Analysts have concluded that the Swedish subsidy system has helped to reverse the trend towards contraction, slowed down the movement towards concentration, and sustained a greater degree of press diversity than would have otherwise existed. The danger of subsidy manipulation in the interest of pro-government papers has been avoided through all-party representation on the Press Subsidies Board, and through the construction of formal rules of grant allocation. However, one major objection to transplanting this system to the UK is that it would be introduced too late. Selective press subsidies could have saved national newspapers like the *Daily Herald* and *News Chronicle*, and sustained local press competition. But the local press is now highly monopolistic, and the shrinkage in the editorial diversity of the national press makes this freeze-frame approach increasingly inappropriate. In contrast, the press subsidies system was introduced in Sweden when there was still a party-aligned, local press that was thought worth saving in the interests of diversity.

However, a number of other 'repair shop' proposals have been advanced which are intended to generate rather than conserve media diversity. They usually seek to do one of four things: facilitate entry into the market, extend access to distribution, make it easier for non-commercial ventures to survive, or for audiences to get what they want. These schemes are nearly always justified by the need to compensate for market failure, the classic rationale of the social market workshop approach.

Thus, the high costs of market entry are the justification for a number of schemes – a National Printing Corporation, Newspaper Launch Fund, and Media Enterprise Board – designed to assist resource-poor groups to enter the market. Distribution exclusions are the rationale for various producer access proposals: giving publishers the legal right to have lawful newspapers and magazines stocked and displayed by newsagents (as in France, Germany, and Greece); establishing new regional arts cinemas as a way of increasing the independent film sector's access to the market (inspired by municipal ownership of all cinemas in Norway); and, perhaps most important of all, making the set-top boxes pioneered by Murdoch available to all producers at a fair price so that the gateway to digital television is open and unrestricted. Third, there are a number of schemes for supporting the production of communications (such as poetry magazines or community television) which are judged to be a public good but which are unlikely to be sustained in significant numbers by a free market system. Finally, there are various schemes for extending audience access including additions to the reserved list of sports events that are available to public broadcasters; an ingenious proposal advanced by Hirsh and Gordon that would make it economic for quality newspapers to attract lower income readers; and expanding the range of free facilities offered by public libraries.

This workshop approach straddles both left and right. However, there is an avowedly socialist version which has an affinity to the radical public service approach (which will be considered in a moment), if it was not for its promarket orientation. An example of this maverick perspective is provided by a paper written by Geoff Mulgan, Director of Demos, and Pete Jenner, a radical pop music manager, which advocates a major overhaul of the radio system. Their starting point is that 'the BBC model of a large public bureaucracy has little to do with a modern idea of socialism'. It is too closely linked to the state, and stifles innovation. More generally, they argue, the model of planned diversity through public regulation is insensitive to public demand. It 'implicitly assumes that radio should provide what people need rather than what they want. . . . Regulation is used to impose its own value of what is valuable', which in the case of the BBC means allocating disproportionate resources to minority, middle-class audiences. On the other hand, a wholly *laissez-faire* policy is undesirable because it encourages programme uniformity, the chain ownership of radio stations, and underfunding. The answer, they suggest, is a different approach in which a

public agency would promote diversity in the control of the radio system rather than be concerned with content regulation. It would provide seed finance for new ventures, especially those with new and innovative management structures such as employee ownership, subscribers with voting rights, consumer co-ops, and stations linked to community groups.

### **Radical public service**

The fourth main group in the politics of the media are people in the radical public service tradition. They are almost as critical of traditional public service broadcasting as they are of the privately owned press. What is needed, they argue, is new media structures which are fully independent of both the state and market.

Advocates of this approach include both radical liberals and socialists. They are unified more by what they are against than what they are for, more by a rhetorical affinity than a unifying theory. This said, much radical public service argument in recent years has referred to the concept of the public sphere; that is, the public space between the state and the private domain, where the public direction of society is debated and where popular pressure is brought to bear through the force of public opinion. The media, it is argued, are the principal channels of the public sphere, the main means by which a collective dialogue is conducted and informal influence exercised over the state. Since the media are part of the democratic system of selfmanagement, they should be – in a phrase that has become almost a slogan – ‘free and open’.

Freedom and openness cannot be secured, it is argued, through the free market because the high costs of entry, media concentration, advertising distortion, and commodification impose a largely invisible but potent form of censorship. But the traditional public service alternative also restricts and censors. It is influenced unduly by the official culture of the state, as indicated by the BBC’s embarrassed acknowledgement in 1985 that its staff appointments were routinely vetted by the state security service. It is also affected, though decreasingly so, by a Reithian conception of cultural leadership in which it is assumed that the masses should be educated and uplifted by an enlightened élite.

Good examples of the socialist and liberal versions of this general approach are provided respectively by Raymond Williams and John Keane.<sup>13</sup> The late Raymond Williams argued that collective control over the means of mass communication was needed to further a ‘cultural revolution’, based on a universal right to transmit and receive information. This would enable people to grow in the power to direct their own lives, extend collective understanding through the exchange of experience, and develop ‘the capacity for personal and independent response and choice’.

Broadcasting, according to Williams, has been stunted by authoritarian, commercial, and paternal forms of organization. The untried alternative is a ‘democratic’ one. The BBC and commercial broadcasting should be replaced by public trusts which would own production and transmission facilities on behalf of society and lease these, on long-term contracts, to independent companies which would control programme-making. These companies would be run by broadcasters in a democratic way, not by administrators who would be required to work within the framework of ‘elected policy’.

Similarly, newspapers should be acquired by newspaper trusts and leased to their editors and journalists. Newsprint companies should be in separate public ownership, and provide supplies at a ‘fair and open price’. Within this system, working journalists should determine editorial policy.

The underlying principle behind this proposed reorganization is that ‘the active contributors [should] have control over their own means of expression’. When the means of expression are so costly that they are beyond their means to own, society should step in to enable them to exercise control over their own work. This form of public intervention is enabling, since it secures the freedom of journalists and creative staff and protects them ‘alike from the bureaucrat and the speculator’.

By contrast, John Keane approaches the task of restructuring the media from the perspective of a radical liberal who, in his own words, ‘acknowledges the facts of complexity, diversity and difference, and – in plain English – harbours doubts about whether any one person, group, committee, party or organisation can be trusted to make superior choices on matters of concern to citizens’. What is needed, in his view, is a pluralistic media system which involves different people in different ways in overseeing the exercise of power in society. Only some media, he suggests, should be subject to what he calls ‘the time-consuming and unwieldy procedures of direct democracy’, the strategy favoured by Williams.

Yet despite their differences of approach, both Williams and Keane tread rather similar paths. They both mount a critique of market and state-linked media. They both seek to create media that are independent – what Keane calls in a Germanic formulation ‘non-market-non-state media institutions’. In both cases, this results in the search for self-effacing forms of public intervention that are positively enabling. In Keane’s case, this means ‘a wide range of different regulated markets for different audiences and services’. These could include, among other things, time-share and common carrier arrangements with private media corporations; the funding of local independent cinemas, recording studios, and lease-back broadcasting facilities; subsidized political newspapers; co-operatively run publishers and distributors; and even a reformed BBC.

However, the ‘third route’ rhetoric of both Williams and Keane raises almost as many questions as it answers. One unresolved issue is how state involvement is to be reined back in

the way they both want. The intricate cat's cradle of subsidies, allocations, interventions, regulations, and market suspensions outlined by Keane would lead, in fact, to a very extensive exercise of authority over the media by agencies that are part of the state. The same is true, to a lesser extent, of Williams' scheme. He mistakenly assumes that leasing the technical means of communication, on long-term contracts, to communicator-controlled consortia will enable 'public trusts' to take a back seat. But in fact these trusts or some other public agency would have to fund these consortia initially, and decide whether to support them if they ran into financial trouble. By default, public authorities would exercise some of the power formerly exercised by what Williams calls revealingly 'functionless financial groups' within the market system. This is not to imply that public agency involvement necessarily leads to state editorial control since checks and balances can be introduced in order to avoid this. But the radical public service approach often invokes an anti-statist rhetoric that sits uneasily with what it actually proposes. It also pays too little attention to ways of preventing the abuse of state power, partly because this danger is conveniently banished by emollient words like 'enabling' and 'facilitating'.

The second key issue is who should be entrusted with control over the media. Raymond Williams argued that control should lie with professional communicators since 'any restriction of the freedom of individual contribution' is a restriction on the freedom of society. But why should professional communicators, who are unrepresentative of society and often surprisingly uninformed about their audiences even within market systems, be established as a communications élite with exclusive rights of control over the media? Indeed, why should they be elevated above others in the same organization, rather in the manner of the Master and Fellows of Colleges of Cambridge University (where Williams worked)? To these questions different people within the radical public service tradition give different answers. Some syndicalists favour workers' control in different spheres of operation, with media staff controlling the editorial process, and production workers controlling the production process. Tom Baistow argues that editors or their equivalent should function as trustees of the public interest, and their autonomy should be legally protected from private employers and trade unions alike. Others, still, argue for consumer, party, social group, professional or local community representation in the organization of the media. For example, the Militant Tendency, a Trotskyist organization, proposes that broadcasting and newspaper organizations should be allocated to political parties in accordance with the votes cast in the previous general election, while magazines should be handed over to scientific, technical, and professional organizations – a scheme that leaves little scope for the voice of the consumer, and excludes organizations that the Militant Tendency regards as 'undemocratic'. By contrast John Keane beguilingly argues, as we have seen, that different media should be controlled by different people in different ways.

The dominant view is that media workers' power should be balanced in some way by the rights of the public. This still leaves open how much influence media workers should have, and in what form. The basic options in ascending order of significance are: staff entitlement to information; the right to be consulted about major decisions; participation in senior appointments; representation on decision-making committees (editorial committees, boards of management, supervisory boards, etc.); regular staff elections to senior management posts; full workers' control.

Critics like Keane and Williams offer blueprints of new media systems, informed by root-and-branch criticism of what we have now. There is, however, a more quietist strain within the radical public service tradition which points to specific shortcomings. The four most common complaints are that public service broadcasting organizations are too vulnerable to government pressure, too embedded in the Establishment, too steeped in cultural convention, and overly bureaucratic. There are remedies proposed for each of these defects.

One way of increasing broadcasters' independence, currently proposed by the Labour Party, is for the BBC to be established by Act of Parliament rather than Royal Charter. The argument for this is partly that it will strengthen the BBC's security and independence by ending the cycle of uncertainty over Charter renewal, and remove the discretionary powers available to government under the royal prerogative. The Labour Party also proposes that the National Heritage Select Committee should interview and propose members of broadcasting authorities, instead of the present system of direct government appointments.

Another set of proposals seeks to change the guidelines of public service broadcasting. The radical Changing Television Group argued, for instance, that the obligation to report with 'due impartiality' is an impossible objective that is handed to broadcasters' own satisfaction only because they have a common outlook rooted in their 'homogeneous social, educational and economic background'. It should be dropped in favour of a commitment to 'represent fairly and accurately the differences within society, and . . . produce programmes from different perspectives'. Others argue that the commitment to objectivity is a restraint on the prejudices of predominantly white, male and middle-class broadcasters, and that its removal would lead to a further ideological distortion of the broadcasting system (as it has in the United States). Rather, the social basis of broadcasting staff recruitment should be widened to include more women, members of ethnic minorities, and non-graduates.

Left-wing reformers have also called for the BBC to be subdivided on the grounds that it is too large, hierarchical, and bureaucratic. One line of argument has been that its commitment to 'democratising culture', based on extending access to élite notions of what is good, should be replaced by a commitment to 'cultural democracy' which seeks to extend popular involvement in the definition and production of culture. This usually leads to demands for the BBC to be restructured into smaller, more localized, autonomous units. These demands have

been pressed less frequently than they used to be, following the introduction of a 25 per cent independent production quota. Instead, the quota argument has been given a new twist, with Sylvia Harvey and Kevin Robins proposing that at least 50 per cent of BBC network radio and television output should be produced outside of London by the turn of the century. They claim that this would reconnect public service broadcasting to the grass roots, and end its current metropolitan domination.<sup>14</sup>

The radical public service tradition has exerted less influence than other traditions. This is partly because it was politically marginalized during the Conservative ascendancy. It is also better at describing what it is against than what it is for. The high point of its influence was perhaps in the late 1970s and early 1980s when a rising volume of radical criticism of the BBC contributed to a climate of opinion in which people cast around for new ways of interpreting the public service tradition. A number of people pressed for a new form of public service organization: a 'publishing house' which would commission rather than make programmes. It would be innovative, serve minorities, and extend the ideological spectrum (though this last idea was largely missing in the official literature). The concept won the backing of the Annan Committee, the support of the outgoing Labour (Callaghan) government, and of the first Thatcher administration, with the result that Channel 4 was born in 1982.

### **Basis of legal debate**

Overlaying debate about the organization of the media is a second division of opinion about media law. Libertarians emphasize the importance of freedom of expression, and the right to know the basis on which all decisions affecting the common good are made. Paternalists tend to emphasize other rights such as the right to security, a fair trial, a good reputation, privacy, property, and the special needs of minors. The main dispute between them is about where the balance should be struck between these competing rights.

However, there can also be another basis of contention. Some paternalists argue that the media should not violate the norms and moral values of society. This goes beyond the case for limited censorship, based on preventing serious harm to others, and potentially constitutes a rationale for a broad measure of control directed against anything that is deemed offensive. Libertarians respond to this challenge in different ways. Some reject the argument outright: liberty, argued George Orwell, means letting people say things you do not want to hear. Others negotiate its terms by saying that a communication has to be offensive to *reasonable* people, or that a distinction should be made between restriction to an adult or volunteer audience and total suppression.

During the 1980s and early 1990s, the tide generally flowed in favour of greater legal and moral controls. The Video Recordings Act (1984) introduced a far-reaching system of



censorship directed at ‘video nasties’. The Broadcasting Standards Council was established in 1988 to provide a focus of public concern about sex, violence, and standards of taste and decency in broadcasting. It was strengthened by being given the power to compel transmission of its indictments in 1990, and was merged with the Broadcasting Complaints Council in 1996. Broadcasters were required by the 1990 Broadcasting Act not to transmit programmes offensive to public feeling. However, an attempt by the British government to secure moral regulation of broadcasting through concerted European action met with only limited success due to the resistance of some of Britain’s partners. The most significant moral injunction in the 1989 Television Without Frontiers Directive is that directed against ‘programmes which might seriously impair the . . . development of minors’. Conservative administrations also exerted strong pressure, both through private channels and through public flak, for broadcasters to censor themselves, most notably in relation to Northern Ireland. When this encountered some resistance, a gagging prohibition was imposed in 1988 on direct transmissions of speech from Sinn Fein and other ‘terrorist’ organizations until public policy changed with the establishment of a ceasefire in Northern Ireland.

### **Legal paternalism**

This growth of prohibition and moral regulation has not gone far enough in the view of some. Obscenity and indecency laws should be strengthened in order to outlaw widely available pornographic images of women and gratuitous media displays of violence. The rationale for this is not necessarily that violence shown on television leads in a stimulus–response fashion to imitative acts. The more sophisticated argument is that routine exposure to violence on television strengthens already existing dispositions towards violence, both in particular individuals and in the culture of society; and that pornography reinforces misogynistic attitudes, and consequently encourages harmful actions against women. But if some of these arguments appear plausible, they are also difficult to verify empirically. There is still, in Cumberbatch and Howitt’s phrase, ‘a measure of uncertainty’ about the consequences of media pornography and violence.<sup>15</sup>

The second argument for taking tougher action against pornogaphy is that it is offensive. It is experienced as oppressive. It demeans with its constant suggestion of women’s availability. It encourages scorn and contempt. The counter-arguments are that safeguards already exist against the most offensive forms of pornography; suppressing freedom of speech is objectionable; and excessive puritanism can also be viewed as repressive.

Calls for stronger controls against sexism are paralleled by demands for greater protection against racism. Legislation against incitement to racial hatred was introduced in 1965 in the wake of Labour’s loss of the safe seat, Smethwick, with the help of the slogan, ‘If you want a

nigger for a neighbour, vote Labour'. However, prosecutions are usually only successful if it can be shown that racist statements are likely to lead to actual violence or a breakdown of public order. The Tabachnik Report from the Board of Deputies of British Jews (1992) argued that legislation should be strengthened by extending to social groups the same protection against defamation that is currently available to individuals. The counter-argument to this is that it would lead to a substantial extension of censorship, and could be counterproductive in fanning rather than subduing the flames of hatred and intolerance.

Slurs against religion that believers find offensive is another area where increased controls have been urged. Christian belief has been protected from insult by legislation since 1676. Following the Salman Rushdie affair, some Muslim leaders called for similar protection to be extended to other religions in Britain, a position supported by two successive Church of England working parties. However, blasphemy law is increasingly becoming a dead letter (with no prosecution since 1978). Some argue for a different kind of consistency: the abolition rather than extension of protection against blasphemy.

The issue where curbs are most often pressed by politicians is in relation to privacy. This is an issue to which we shall turn in Chapter 22. As we will see, the choice is generally presented as being either a restrictive law or ineffectual self-regulation. There is however a third, more appealing alternative.

### **Legal libertarianism**

Those who press for more censorship are answered by those who argue for less. Heading the libertarian agenda is a proposal that freedom of expression should be given special protection by being embodied in a written constitution. Free speech, it is argued, is under increasing attack and needs to be entrenched as a basic human right. This would mean, for example, that the BBC could turn to the law courts for protection if it felt that its freedom was being improperly curtailed by government. Opponents argue that this reform would be alien to the legal and political tradition of this country. Its effect would be to force judges to make 'political' decisions, a task to which they are unsuited.

Another libertarian target is reform of the 1989 Official Secrets Act. This replaced the blunderbuss of the discredited 1911 Official Secrets Act with an armalite rifle designed to deter, it is claimed, legitimate whistleblowers and proper investigation. It denies a public interest defence for those who reveal protected information. It leaves informants like Sarah Tisdall (gaoled in 1984 for leaking information to the *Guardian* about how the government proposed to manage public opinion when the first US cruise missile was sited in Britain) liable to prosecution even though their offence is to embarrass the government rather than undermine security. And it is the fount of a system of self-censorship in which D-notices are

issued by a joint media–state committee (whose existence was not publicly known for the first forty years of its tenure) advising journalists of matters that are covered by the Official Secrets Act. Libertarian critics argue that the Act should be revised so that it applies only to the betrayal of secrets to a national enemy, and the D-notice system should be discontinued. The counter-argument to this is that public servants should be deterred from breaching their position of trust; a more narrow definition of official secrets would undermine public security on a number of fronts including the war against criminals; and D-notices are merely nonbinding forms of advice designed to deter responsible journalists from inadvertently damaging their country's security.

The third major reform pressed by libertarians is the introduction of a Freedom of Information Act which would grant legal right of access to official information, with a High Court judge determining government claims to privilege. Its principal justification is that it would make government better by making it more open and accountable. It has been introduced, reformers argue, with beneficial results in a number of countries such as Canada, Australia, and the United States. Critics reply that this new law is unnecessary; it would make government more inefficient since it would undermine the confidentiality of decision making; and it would lead to costly and time-wasting litigation.

There is also a running debate between libertarians and paternalists over a range of laws including contempt, defamation, copyright, and confidence. However, something that has received relatively little attention is the growing willingness of judges to issue interim injunctions if it is argued that a forthcoming publication will infringe the law (usually in relation to copyright or confidence). This can be a form of pre-publication censorship since delays can cause reports to become out of date and unusable. It can also promote bad journalism by discouraging reporters from cross-checking their stories for fear of provoking a gagging injunction. The solution, it is argued, is either for greater weight to be given to free speech or for prior restraint by court injunction to be confined only to information that potentially undermines national security or the right to a fair trial. Opponents argue that this last proposal would unduly weaken other rights.

One last caveat should be added. In the general battle over media law, legal libertarians have the best tunes. They have developed an eloquent rhetoric in which the freedom of the media is equated with the freedom of society. On the one side, there is the cause of freedom and the people; on the other, there is the repression of authority supported by secrecy and censorship. But what is generally concealed in this rhetorical presentation is that media freedom is usually defined in practice as the free speech rights of media property owners, and those they appoint. What is being argued for, in reality, is an enlargement of their rights at the expense of other rights, on the grounds that this is in the general interest.

This case is often powerful and compelling. But its limitations are also highlighted when the issue at stake is *whose* free speech should be upheld. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, Fleet Street workers took industrial action on several occasions to secure the right of reply for targets of press attacks. From 1981 onwards, a number of MPs proposed private members' bills, with cross-party support, that would give to victims of press distortion or factual misrepresentation a legal right to secure published corrections, broadly in line with right of reply laws in a number of Northern European countries. Both these initiatives sought to enlarge rather than restrict freedom of communication through the press. In both cases, they were strongly resisted as an attack on the free speech rights of press controllers to determine what goes into their newspapers. This underlined the sometimes exclusive nature of the freedom which uncritical libertarians present as universal.

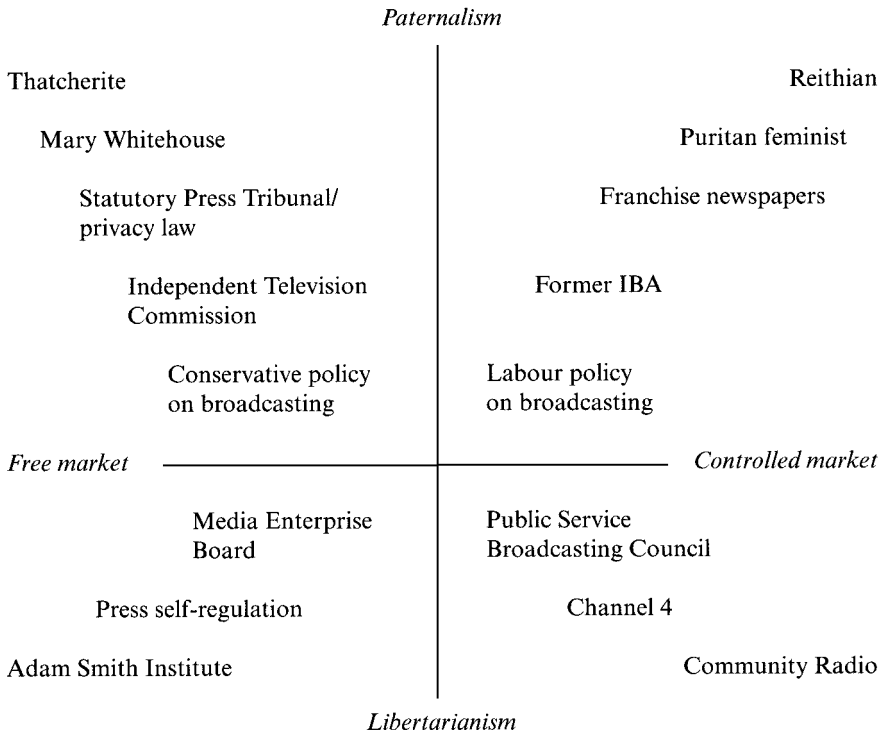
A quizzical response also seems appropriate in the wake of attempts to strengthen the rights of media staff. These have implicitly defined the freedom *of* the media as including freedom *within* the media. Generally, they have taken a modest form such as the proposal that journalists should have a right of conscience recognized in their contracts of employment. Yet these proposals have been consistently opposed by the National Publishers Association. The freedom of the press remains the freedom of the people who own it, however it is presented.

### Map of media politics

The simple dichotomy of left and right does not adequately describe the politics of the media. In broad terms, those on the left are less inclined, even now, to support a free market policy than those on the right. But this difference is overlaid by a cleavage between paternalism and libertarianism that does not correspond to a straightforward left-right divide. This results in some strange convergencies. Thus the left-wing, libertarian community radio movement and the right-wing, libertarian Adam Smith Institute have both pressed for the reduction of controls because they have in common a strong antipathy to the 'state-corporate' organization of broadcasting. Similarly, some left-wing feminists like Clare Short have joined conservative traditionalists like Mary Whitehouse in calling for greater moral regulation of the media because both groups share certain values in common which they believe the media should respect. Consequently, the contemporary map of media politics does not reflect a simple party division (for a summary guide, see Figure 1).

In fact, both parties of the left and right are split over media policy. Within the Conservative Party, there is a group of neo-liberal paternalists, once led by Margaret Thatcher, who favour a free market authoritarian state approach. They were active in the battle to advance broadcasting free enterprise, the auctioning of franchises, an independent production quota, and their priority is now to privatize Channel 4 and make the licence fee a

Figure 1 *Politics of the media*



voluntary subscription. But this same group also played an active part in extending broadcasting regulation. Among other things, they urged the setting up of the Broadcasting Standards Council to check the permissiveness of television, pressed for concerted European action against televised pornography, and backed the television ban on Sinn Fein.

However, there is another group within the Conservative Party and its hinterland, which is committed both to a free market and a minimal state. Typified by the nominally non-aligned Institute of Economic Affairs, this group of right-wing reformers pressed for the relaxation of both content and economic controls over broadcasting. Consistently libertarian, they clashed with their right-wing allies, even accusing them of ‘new-style authoritarianism’. As Samuel Brittan, an influential figure on the libertarian New Right and a former member of the Peacock Committee, put it:

In principle, Mrs Thatcher and her supporters are all in favour of deregulation, competition and consumer choice. But they are also even more distrustful than

traditionalist Tories of policies that allow people to listen to and watch what they like, subject only to the law of the land. They espouse the market system but dislike the libertarian value-judgements involved in its operation.<sup>16</sup>

The main body of opinion in the Conservative Party supports gradual market liberalization in the context of continuing commitment to public service broadcasting. The public service approach is identified with maintaining standards, sustaining programme choice, and defending a national cultural identity. Like the National Health Service, public service broadcasting has also retained popular political support. A succession of ministers responsible for broadcasting – William Whitelaw, Douglas Hurd, David Mellor, Stephen Dorrell, and Virginia Bottomley – came from this mainstream tradition, and successfully defended public service broadcasting against critics and opponents within their own party.

There are corresponding divisions within the Labour Party, although these are filtered through a left prism. On the paternalist left, there is a dwindling group of irreconcilables who are morally affronted by advertising, critical of commercial broadcasting, and saddened by what they see as the BBC's loss of mission and self-belief. There is also another growing group who are in a sense the modern heirs of Reithian paternalism. They want to restore a sense of mission to broadcasting – as a moral force against sexism and racism. Some favour controls over broadcasting similar to those desired by the moral right.

On the libertarian left, there is a widespread desire to change the organization of broadcasting. Some are advocates of 'small is beautiful', and want to see the disaggregation of the broadcasting system into local autonomous units. Others want to diversify ownership of broadcasting within a market economy. The latter group often have more in common with the libertarian New Right than with paternalists on their own side. There is, for example, a clear family resemblance between the left-inspired Media Enterprise Board and the right-inspired Public Service Broadcasting Council in that both want to fund 'public good' projects in a market context.

However, the dominant tendency within the Labour Party is similar to that in the Conservative Party in that it supports the philosophy of public service broadcasting and its key institutions – the BBC, ITC, Radio Authority, and Channel 4. Together, these two blocs constitute the consensual middle ground of contemporary broadcasting politics. However, the Labour mainstream is more critical of gradual economic liberalization than its counterpart within the Conservative Party. Its gut instinct is to slap a preservation order on the broadcasting system as it now is even on the eve of digital TV. In this sense, it is more conservative with a small 'c' than the Conservative Party.

There are also parallel lines of cleavage over press policy, and issues related to the press. Both Labour and Conservative parties have libertarian wings who favour the reform of the Official Secrets Act and the introduction of a Freedom of Information Act, although this group is more numerous on the left. Both parties also have paternalists pressing for increased legal controls over the press, most notably in relation to privacy, obscenity, and contempt law,

though they are more numerous on the right. Both also have free market cohorts, favouring the relaxation of cross-media ownership rules that would enable their political allies in the press to expand. Both also have quietists – once clearly the majority, but perhaps now a minority – who see no need to change anything in relation to the press. What alone differentiates Labour from the Conservatives is that the former has a diminishing group who want to create a public service press or intervene in the market economy of the press.

In short, the politics of the media is not defined by a simple left–right split, corresponding to the division between Labour and Conservatives. There are minorities in both parties who have more in common with each other over media policy than they do with people on their own side. There is also a convergent middle ground uniting the mainstream of both parties, certainly in relation to broadcasting. In this complex mosaic, there are also indications of movement or at least tendencies predisposed to respond to new ideas. In the case of broadcasting, there is a general feeling that the expansion of the system should allow new things to happen; and, in the case of the press, that something, not quite clearly defined, needs to be done about its shortcomings. In this fluid context, what might a progressive but attainable programme of reform look like? An answer is explored in Chapter 22.

## Notes

- 1 Adam Smith Institute, *Omega Report: Communications Policy* (London, Adam Smith Institute, 1984); Adam Smith Institute, *Funding the BBC* (London, Adam Smith Institute, 1985).
- 2 Rupert Murdoch, *Freedom in Broadcasting* (London, News International, 1989), p. 9; Andrew Knight, *A British Success Story* (London, News International, 1993), p. 2.
- 3 This is a central theme of Chapters 14 and 16.
- 4 John Tusa, 'Implications of recent changes', *Political Quarterly*, 65, 1, 1994, p. 10.
- 5 Amendment to Broadcasting Bill moved by Dr John Cunningham, *Parliamentary Debates*, 275 (84), col. 551, 16 April 1996.
- 6 An especially good example of this tradition is provided by Richard Collins and Christina Murrioni, *New Media, New Policies* (Cambridge, Polity Press, 1996).
- 7 *Strategy Options to Strengthen the European Programme Industry in the Context of the Audiovisual Policy of the European Union* (Brussels, European Commission Green Paper, 1994), p. 18.
- 8 *Report by the Think-Tank on the Audiovisual Policy in the European Union* (Vasconcelos Report) (Luxembourg, Commission of the European Communities, 1994).
- 9 *Europe and the Global Information Society: Recommendations to the European Council* (Bangemann Report) (Brussels, European Council, 1994).
- 10 For a good iconoclastic account challenging conventional assumptions about American domination of European television, see Preben Sepstrup, *Transnationalization of Television in Western Europe* (London, Libbey, 1990).
- 11 *Pluralism and Media Concentration in the Internal Market: Commission Green Paper* (Brussels, Commission of the European Communities Green Paper, 1992); *Follow-Up to the Consultative*

- Process Relating to the Green Paper on 'Pluralism and Media Concentration in the Internal Market'* (Brussels, Commission of the European Communities, 1994).
- 12 Robert Picard, *Ravens of Odin* (Ames, Iowa State University Press, 1988); Karl Erik Gustafsson, 'Government policies to reduce newspaper entry barriers', *Journal of Media Economics*, 6, 1, 1993; Lou Lichtenberg, 'The Dutch model of press policy', in K. E. Gustafsson (ed.) *Media Structure and the State* (Gothenberg, Gothenberg University Press, 1995).
  - 13 Raymond Williams, *Communications* (London, Chatto & Windus, revised edn, 1966); John Keane, *Media and Democracy* (Cambridge, Polity Press, 1991). For an alternative version of this tradition, see James Curran, 'Mass media and democracy revisited', in J. Curran and M. Gurevitch (eds) *Mass Media and Society* (London, Arnold, 2nd edn, 1996).
  - 14 Sylvia Harvey and Kevin Robins, 'Voices and places', *Political Quarterly*, 65, 1, 1994.
  - 15 Guy Cumberbatch and Denis Howitt, *A Measure of Uncertainty* (London, Libbey, 1989); cf. Brian McNair, *Mediated Sex* (London, Arnold, 1996).
  - 16 Samuel Brittan, 'The case for the consumer market', in C. Veljanovski (ed.) *Freedom in Broadcasting* (London, Institute of Economic Affairs, 1989), p. 40.



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## *Media reform*

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### **Introduction**

The mass media are gradually changing the operation of the British political system, and rewriting its informal constitution. They provide the raw material out of which subjective identities, a sense of self and of others, are partly constructed. They occupy over three hours of the average person's day, and are central to the routines and pleasures of modern life. They are seemingly at the threshold of a major internal change and are part of the knowledge-based industries that are increasingly central in Western economies. Yet despite the growing importance of the communications industries, there is no public forum in which to discuss their performance and consider how best they can be developed in the public interest. This is the main reason why a Royal Commission on the communications industries should be appointed.

A Royal Commission could also pave the way for progressive change. The concentration of private media power in Britain chills public discussion of media reform and intimidates political leaders. Political parties (especially those to the left and centre) need, in this area, the legitimation and courage that an independent enquiry can provide.

Political parties are part of the problem as well as the solution. There are authoritarian groups in both the Conservative and Labour parties, which pose a threat to the autonomy of the public broadcasting system. An independent investigation is needed which takes a wider view, including one that considers how broadcasters can be protected from politicians.

A major inquest at this point is also the best way of breaking out of the corridor thinking that conventional, single-media industry enquiries have fostered. Its appointment is overdue: the last major inquiry into the press ended two decades ago, and that into broadcasting a decade ago.

However, in the absence of a major public inquiry, proposals for media reform need to be advanced and debated. What follows is not a full manifesto. It omits in fact some worthwhile

proposals outlined earlier. Instead, it singles out certain key themes, and discusses how these might be tackled in the next five years. Where Chapter 21 offered an impersonal overview, this is a personal epilogue.

### **Alternative approach**

If the free market strategy of the right is to be answered effectively, it has to be countered by an alternative that is more appealing than the current practice of public service broadcasting. This alternative needs to be insulated from state pressure, and to respond more readily to the full diversity of British society. It also needs to create new spaces for innovative programme-making.

The need for change is underlined by cumulative evidence that eighteen years of single party rule has weakened (though not destroyed) the political independence of public service broadcasting. No less important, the decline of political parties as representative and formative institutions makes it necessary to change the ground rules of reporting and commenting on public life in the broadcast media.

Political parties have lost much of their mass membership, compared with their heyday. They no longer command the same degree of partisan allegiance and identification among the electorate that they once did, and have consequently lost influence over their social constituencies. Above all, they are the products of class formations which have been ruptured and transformed by economic and cultural change, and are no longer representative institutions – the natural vehicles of cohesive social blocs – that they were, to a much greater degree, half a century ago. Yet while their place in society has declined, their influence on broadcasting has not diminished. They continue to monopolize avenues of access to radio and television, and in the process crowd out other collective organizations. A way has to be found of weaning public service broadcasting from party domination, from its fixation with the symbolic processes of Westminster, and to enable it to respond more fully to wider social movements and trends in society.

Finally, reform needs to foster creative programme-making. Public service broadcasting (in the sense of publicly regulated or owned channels) is partly insulated from the market pressures that make for uniformity and blandness. Its programme range has expanded with the introduction of Channel 4. But it is still dominated to a remarkable degree by a metropolitan culture. The increased centralization at the BBC, and increased commercialization of Channel 3, is also making the core system more culturally conservative, more inclined to fall back on heritage programmes and tried and tested formulae.

In short, the way to respond to the challenge of the new right's market project is to develop a public service alternative that is free and open, representative and diverse.

### **Broadcasting independence**

The system of government appointments to broadcasting authorities has become corrupt and debased. It is weakening the political independence of the broadcasting system. For example, all those appointed to chair the BBC during the Conservative ascendancy were known Conservative supporters. Indeed, the previous long-standing Chairman of the BBC, Marmaduke Hussey, was a brother-in-law of a Cabinet minister: his predecessor, Stuart Young, was the brother of one.

A better method of making appointments than the present unmediated system of government patronage needs to be found. The proposal currently advanced by the Labour Party in an internal document – for a Parliamentary Select Committee to interview and recommend new appointees to broadcasting authorities – is only a partial advance. It keeps decision making firmly within the ambit of the dominant party. Choices would be determined in effect by a committee of MPs, of which the majority would normally come from the governing party, and the government of the day.

Yet an alternative, left-wing proposal for direct elections to broadcasting authorities is even less appealing. Political parties are the only organizations with the resources available to mobilize large numbers of people to the polls. Consequently, direct elections could result in the governing party gaining legitimated control over broadcasting authorities, and using this power to bring broadcasters to heel – the very opposite of what most left-wing reformers actually want.

The best solution is to establish an independent appointments committee, including some representatives from the broadcasting industry. It should guard against not only government but also Establishment ‘packing’: eight out of twelve BBC governors in 1992, for instance, went to three universities – Oxford, Cambridge, and London. In the selection process, the appointments committee should invite representative organizations to advance names, and interview a short-list. The convention of broadcast authority members acting as representatives of the nation rather than of sectional groups should be retained. But the objective should be to ensure that those appointed really are broadly representative of the country, and have the qualities needed to make a positive contribution to the public control of our core broadcasting institutions.

Another way of safeguarding the independence and future of the BBC is to finance it more adequately, and in a way that makes it no longer beholden to government. There should be automatic increases in the licence fee linked to increases in national earnings. To mitigate their effect, licence fee exemptions could be introduced for low-income households compensated by Treasury grant.

### Reinterpreting public service

A stunted definition of public service broadcasting is upheld by the law, the BBC's Royal Charter, and by what may be called the 'official literature' of public inquiry reports and government consultation papers. It is inhibiting the renewal of public service broadcasting.

Certain key concepts have a very restricted meaning within this official canon. Thus, 'social access' is discussed primarily in terms of access to broadcast signals in outlying areas. It is about a right to reception rather than expression, the right to watch and listen but not to be heard.

Similarly, the notion of 'diversity' is understood in an unduly narrow and limiting way. It is conceived solely in terms of a mix of programmes that cater for minority as well as majority tastes, offer a balanced cultural diet (including 'quality' fibre), and serve different needs (including children's education). It is not about ideological pluralism, and extending the right to communicate. Moreover, diversity is discussed primarily in relation to non-political programmes. When political programmes are under review, the main concern is objectivity. As the White Paper on Media Ownership (1995) noted succinctly: 'programme requirements are focused on securing qualitative objectives or ensuring the accurate and impartial reporting of views and opinions, rather than securing plurality.'<sup>1</sup>

This astigmatic view stems from an inadequate understanding of the wider role of broadcasting. No attention is given to who is included and excluded in broadcast debate because broadcasting is not conceived in terms of mediating the collective dialogue of society. Indeed, this notion was mocked with patrician disdain by the Annan Committee as the equivalent of wanting broadcasting to be a 'Witenagemot' (the king's advisory council in Anglo-Saxon times).<sup>2</sup> Nowhere in the last two Broadcasting Acts, the BBC's Royal Charter, or the report of the last major inquiry into broadcasting is widening social access to collective debate identified as one of the purposes of public service broadcasting.<sup>3</sup>

This omission matters because broadcasting operates in the context of an élite political culture and a highly centralized system of government. There are strong pressures on broadcast journalists to internalize uncritically the Westminster–Whitehall consensus, take their bearings from the leaderships of the parliamentary parties, and to rely on the 'authoritative' and 'accredited' as their sources of information. A conscious policy of resisting these pressures is needed, if the collective conversation conducted through broadcasting is to be broadened to include non-élite groups.

Yet within the broadcasting community, there has long been an unofficial tradition committed to extending the range of voices and perspectives heard on the airwaves. This has been central to the radical social realist tradition of television drama.<sup>4</sup> It has given rise to the adoption of new programme formats such as radio phone-ins and audience participant talk

shows,<sup>5</sup> and resulted in Channel 4 widening the ideological spectrum of broadcasting in a way that was not specified in its legislative brief. This unofficial ‘access’ movement is besieging even the citadels of conventional broadcast journalism. ‘Involve a wider range of experts and members of the public. Reflect the country, get away from white men in suits, get away from the M25 [London’s ring road]’, commanded one internal BBC memorandum in 1995.<sup>6</sup> This was translated by young feminist journalists on *Newsnight* into a series of remarkable reports which placed the marginalized at the centre, and gave eloquent voice to the voiceless.<sup>7</sup>

This unofficial movement should be given recognition and legitimacy by becoming part of what public service broadcasting seeks to achieve. To the ‘due objectivity’ obligation should be added a ‘pluralism’ requirement. Licensed broadcasters should have a public duty to give adequate expression to a diversity of perspectives and viewpoints, and to facilitate the participation of different groups in the collective dialogue of society. This should be entrenched in law, incorporated into the Constitution of the BBC, and become part of the public service duties that the ITC and Radio Authority uphold.

This is a more effective strategy of reform than seeking solely to construct an alternative, ‘non-state’ media system or to multiply access programmes where the pressure for reform can be confined and quarantined. It means seeking to change the commanding heights of the media system, where the main formative conversations of society take place. This reform, combined with an independent appointments system, will also strengthen the democratic credentials of the public broadcasting system at a time when it will be fighting for funding and public support. It is a way of ensuring that public service broadcasting really is, in practice as well as in theory, independent, representative, and committed to empowering all sections of the community – in striking contrast to a press that is owned by big business, unrepresentative in its views, and committed to furthering private agendas and interests.

### Reinventing tradition

Channel 4 is a successful innovation, an imaginative way of reinterpreting the public service tradition. But it was introduced in 1982. Since then, new technology has multiplied the number of television channels, yet these have all been defined by a market logic.

How, then, should the repertoire of public service broadcasting be extended, particularly now that digitalization can facilitate the introduction of new public service channels? What new conception and structure should be introduced to add a further dimension to the public service tradition? In casting around for an answer, it is perhaps worth tuning in, paradoxically, to the conversations of backward-looking traditionalists. When they argue that the British system allows programme-makers more autonomy than either the American market model or the politicized public service models of continental Europe, they have a point. At best, the

British system fosters both creativity and craft skill as a result of the relative freedom it allows broadcasters at the level of producer.

However, this celebration of the British tradition also contains an element of self-deception. Even in the so-called 'golden age' of broadcasting during the 1960s, there were always checks and controls. These were rooted unobtrusively in the many ways in which broadcasters were socialized into corporate convention, as well as in the more obvious and explicit constraint of 'referring up' controversial decisions to a higher level of management.<sup>8</sup> Individual autonomy has since been reduced by the Birtian revolution at the BBC, and by the increased market orientation of Channel 3 companies.

However, myth can be the mother of invention. The much vaunted strengths of the British system, arising from the operational freedom it allows its creative staff, can be maximized through the introduction of a new form of public service broadcasting. After all, an idealized view of the small 'independent publisher' partly inspired the original conception of Channel 4. Another idealized image, that of the free and unshackled programme-maker, could be the inspiration for another kind of public service organization responsible for the 'Free Channels'.

A small public corporation should be established which would run one national minority television and radio channel. It would be exposed to a different social and political culture to that in London and the south-east by being based in Glasgow and Liverpool. It would be publicly funded (perhaps from a tax on television subscriptions) in order to shield it from market pressure. It would also be free from any prohibition or restriction other than the law of the land. In effect, it would be the only broadcasting organization in the world which would be completely free from both regulatory and commercial controls. Its remit would be, simply, to make good programmes.

### **Civic media sector**

Reform of public service broadcasting leaves untouched deregulated media. Here, priority should be given perhaps to promoting the civic media sector. In this context, political parties should be seen not as a problem (with too much airtime at the expense of other organizations) but as one exemplar among others of a democratic culture.

The civic media sector consists of media linked to collective organizations like environmental campaigning groups, and social constituencies such as sexual minorities and immigrant groups. They range from party newspapers to ethnic radio stations, union videos to feminist magazines, some music independents to campaign newsletters. They are a significant, if largely uncelebrated, part of our media system. They can help communities of

interest to coalesce by providing a positive group identity and unifying focus. They can also facilitate communication between members of the same organization or group, and provide an outlet for disseminating ideas and information to a wider public.

The case for supporting the civic media sector is similar to that for providing financial support for political parties. It is a way of sustaining collective organizations as a counterweight to private interests, and supporting the basic building-blocks of the democratic system. Self-organized groups are the key means by which people lobby for their collective interests, and express their sense of what is right. They constitute the life force of civil society, sustaining a culture of public accountability and freedom.

This approach also represents a cheap but efficient strategy for increasing media diversity. A small amount of public money can go a long way because the civic media operate in low-cost sectors. It can also have a ripple effect since civic media can be a significant source of ideas and talent for mainstream media. Thus, relatively small sums invested in reviving the political magazine press may be a more effective way of injecting new diversity into the national press than investing in new high-risk and high-cost newspaper ventures, some of which are likely to fail.

Admittedly, this approach can be criticized for setting its sights too low. In principle, something should be done about the wall of economic exclusion that surrounds major media markets. It costs over £10 million to establish a national cable television channel, some £20 million to establish a new national newspaper, and many times this to start up a new, transnational satellite television service.<sup>9</sup> Without some form of public intervention designed to assist market entry, control over major commercial media will continue to be confined to the economically powerful.

The national press will also continue to be more right wing than the public, and to distort the political system by under-representing the left, unless its underlying economic structure is changed. This structure both denies market access to resource-poor groups, and proscribes general minority newspapers serving low-income as distinct from high-income groups. Only a launch and selective subsidy system, directed towards nurturing and sustaining innovation and redressing advertising inequalities, will change this.

But this is ruled out by the current climate of political opinion which is hostile to public intervention in the 'free market', save in the form of watchdog regulation. This political consensus is doubly inconsistent. It turns a blind eye to far-reaching intervention in the broadcasting market. It also ignores the existence of continuing subsidies, often targeted towards the richest corporations (such as VAT zero-rating on newspapers which benefits the strongest newspapers with the biggest sales). But however illogical, it is a fact of political life.

To be effective, it is necessary to advance schemes that have a chance of being implemented. Media 4 (named after Channel 4) should be set up, with modest aims and

endowed with modest funds from the National Lottery. It should have two briefs: to provide start-up and development aid for a small number of new projects in low-cost, niche markets, and to advise the government about ways of assisting the development of the civic media sector (such as action to enable minority publishers to gain access to oligopolistic newsagents). Media 4 would have all-party representation, and would support only those projects which, on the basis of professional assessment, have a reasonable chance of success. It would also help only those applicants (1) without extensive media interests; (2) with a demonstrable need for public venture capital; and (3) whose proposed enterprise would add significantly to the diversity of the media system. Its most significant area of impact is likely to be in local radio, specialist book and magazine publishing, and independent music production.

### **Beyond democratic reach?**

A new approach to media concentration is needed. The reason for this is not that media concentration has ceased to be a problem. Rather it is because the conventional policy response to this is being abandoned.

Ownership of the press is in fact very much more concentrated in Britain than in most other countries in Western Europe.<sup>10</sup> A rapid succession of mergers (Meridian/Anglia, Carlton/Central, and Granada/London Weekend Television) is leading to increased concentration in free-to-air, commercial television. The largest press owner in Britain, Murdoch's News Corporation, also dominates British satellite television. Belying the talk of exploding media choice is the reality of major media corporations forming strategic alliances to colonize new media markets.

This situation calls for the strengthening rather than relaxation of monopoly controls. Ownership of the press and broadcasting should be kept separate. The onus should be placed on large media corporations to demonstrate that any proposed new media acquisition is in the public interest, with the presumption being that it is not. A common European approach to media monopoly control should be sought on the basis of best practice.

But what is desirable in principle is difficult to win political support for in practice. One problem is that the globalization of media markets is making a tough regulatory stance harder to sustain. The US Department of Commerce has called for the relaxation of monopoly controls so that the US communications industry can meet the growing challenge posed by rivals in Europe and the Far East. The European Commission is implicitly calling for the same thing on this side of the Atlantic. Media groups in Europe, it believes, should get bigger in order to achieve the large financial resources, distribution muscle, and multi-media synergy that will enable them to take on American communications giants on a more equal basis.



Similar arguments are coming from senior politicians on both sides of the political divide in Britain. Behind this common chorus<sup>11</sup> is the orchestrated pressure of large media corporations (co-ordinated in Britain by the Media Industry Group) with a powerful message: deregulation is the key to competitive success in the global market.

Large media corporations are also so politically powerful that they are in a position to shape their own regulatory environment. A skilful operator like Rupert Murdoch has been able to weave his way past regulatory obstacles in Australia, the United States, and Britain through a combination of political horse-trading, intimidation and charm. Even having a legislative framework of monopoly controls in place is not enough: they have to be enforced. A further problem is that monopoly restrictions can be evaded through the transmission of programmes by satellite from a base outside national jurisdiction. The only effective response to this is to impose a concerted system of monopoly control through a supra-national agency like the European state, which has yet to be achieved.

If the current strategy is not working, what should be done? While the answer is not to abandon monopoly controls, these need to be supplemented by something new. Existing policy is geared to promoting *external* pluralism through market regulation. This needs to be supported by promoting *internal* pluralism through organizational reform.

Strengthening the pluralism obligation of public service broadcasting, as suggested earlier, is one key way of promoting the expression of diverse viewpoints on BBC and regulated commercial channels. However, content regulation is not something that can win political support in relation to the press. Here, diversity could be encouraged by shifting the balance of power from press controllers to editors and working journalists.

In the national press, just four groups control 89 per cent of circulation. The titles in each of these groups tend to adopt rather similar editorial positions, and almost identical ones at election time. Greater press variety could be fostered by devolving power within these groups. Each title would then have greater freedom to develop in different editorial directions.

This should be in response to audience and democratic staff pressure. Journalists should be allowed to participate in a meaningful way in the appointment of editors. In this way editors would become the joint choice of management and staff rather than, as is generally the case now, people imposed from above. Under this scheme, the rights of editors would also be given contractual protection. This should include the right to reject copy or editorial services provided by central management; the right to reject advice on editorial policy from their publisher; and, above all, the right to determine the contents of the paper.<sup>12</sup> In the case of large newspapers, editors' contracts should specify at least twelve months' notice since this is the minimum security needed for them to feel able to assert their rights. In turn, journalists should also have the right to refuse to handle copy that breaches an Industry Code of Conduct, with legal protection against unfair dismissal (as in Sweden).

In all large press groups, all newspaper staff should also be able to elect employee or independent directors, constituting up to one-half of the board. Past experience underlines the value of democratic involvement. Staff on the *Observer* in effect chose the independent directors who played a significant part in limiting Lonrho's debasement of the paper in the mid-1980s. On Times Newspapers, where independent directors were not chosen by staff, the system was less effective. Independent directors were bypassed, and then weeded out in favour – in the phrase of one ousted director – of 'Murdoch men'.

This whole approach is consistent with the 'stakeholder' concept, central to some New Labour thinking. It implies that newspapers should not be run exclusively for the benefit of shareholders, and should take into account the interests of staff and the wider public. It is in the interests of the public that journalists in the monopolistic press should have more control over what they do.

### **New legal settlement**

A new legal settlement should be introduced. It should aim to extend the freedom of the media to oversee the state and large business corporations, while further protecting ordinary citizens from the abuse of media power.

A Freedom of Information Act should be introduced which opens up government papers to journalistic and public scrutiny. The Official Secrets Act should be reformed by introducing a less elastic definition of an official secret, and a stronger public interest defence for its disclosure. The 'D' notice system should be abolished since it leads in practice to an unofficial system of censorship involving public officials and senior media executives. Confidence and copyright law also needs to be reformed so that private business organizations can be subject to more effective scrutiny. All these reforms will help the media to oversee power holders, and hold them to account through the disclosure of information.

However, a one-track approach to legal reform that seeks merely to extend media freedom of expression founders on a basic problem: the media are not, save only in self-serving myth, a disinterested Fourth Estate whose sole allegiance is to the truth and the public interest. In reality, people need to be protected from their self-appointed media guardians.

The issue of how best to protect human rights is now dominated by the debate about introducing a written constitution. If we go down this road, one thing is clear from comparative experience. Freedom of expression must be balanced by, among other things, the public right to know. In the United States, the First Amendment guaranteeing freedom of expression has enabled publishers to resist state law giving victims of press attacks the right of reply, and more recently has been invoked against residual public service obligations on the grounds that these infringe the free speech rights of TV station owners.<sup>13</sup> In contrast, the

German Constitution protects *both* freedom of expression *and* the public's right of access to diverse information. As a result, its Constitutional Court has upheld not only broadcasters' freedom from government control but also their duty to provide programmes that convey different viewpoints.<sup>14</sup> This rightly recognizes that audiences as well as media controllers have communication rights.

There is one area in particular where the existing legal settlement in Britain needs to be revised. There is no adequate redress against lying press misrepresentation, and unjustified intrusions into private grief. Defamation law provides protection primarily for the wealthy who can afford to sue newspapers, while the Press Complaints Commission (PPC) has rubber teeth. It is not taken seriously by the newspapers that it most often criticizes. However, the problem is to find a form of additional protection that does not tilt the balance too far against free expression. Many so-called remedies are too restrictive.

### **Press Commission**

One remedy which has won increasing support is the introduction of a new law that would enable people to sue newspapers for unjustified breaches of privacy. However, this could inhibit critical scrutiny of the powerful without offering adequate protection to ordinary members of the public, many of whom are likely to be deterred by the cost of litigation from seeking redress. Of course, in principle, a privacy law could be hedged about with public interest safeguards, and legal aid could be made available where appropriate. However, it seems unlikely that legal aid – already subject to recurrent cuts – would in fact be available for civil action over privacy. It is also not clear that politicians who have been on the receiving end of a press assault on their personal morality and professional probity, of a ferocity unprecedented in the last half century, would in fact draw the balance between privacy and public interest in an acceptably libertarian way. Indeed, the form in which a privacy bill was proposed by an all-party committee of MPs in 1993 was unduly over-protective of their interests, and would have screened them from legitimate public scrutiny.<sup>15</sup>

Still more restrictive is the proposal advanced by Sir David Calcutt for a statutory press complaints tribunal. Its members would all be appointed by the Heritage Minister, and it would have the authority to suppress in advance publication of material judged to be in breach of the tribunal's code of practice (including unwarranted breaches of privacy). However, this would return us to a system of pre-publication censorship that the press has been rightly resisting since the abandonment of press licensing in the seventeenth century. It is an authoritarian proposal that all political parties currently oppose (at least for the time being).

Yet, Calcutt and other would-be policemen of the press are undoubtedly addressing a genuine problem: the failure of the press to regulate itself properly. Self-regulation only

works, as in the advertising industry, when there is consensual support for it and the self-regulating agency has sanctions. The Press Complaints Commission (PPC) has no sanctions, and it does not have general support in the press. It exists not because it is the product of an internal reform movement, but in response to external pressure from politicians. For this reason, it is viewed with contempt by some journalists.

We are thus presented with an unappealing choice. On the one hand, the public is not being adequately protected. On the other hand, the protections that are being proposed could undermine legitimate free expression. The solution to this dilemma is to make self-regulation work. This will afford a form of protection that is cheaper than the law courts, and is therefore more widely available. It will also obviate the need for punitive state controls.

The only way to make self-regulation work is to invest an industry watchdog with powers that prevent it from being ignored at will. Publishers should agree by legally binding contract to publish with due prominence the adjudications of a reconstituted Press Commission; to print apologies, corrections or replies; and to pay fines imposed in relation to exceptional offences. If publishers will not agree to binding self-regulation (as in Sweden), then these powers will have to be underwritten by statute. There is no other way of avoiding a continuation of the last half-century of ineffectual self-regulation. However, these new powers would stop well short of 'prior restraint' censorship urged by Sir David Calcutt, and those wielding them would not be government appointees.

The other objective should be to connect the Press Commission to the professionalizing tradition within the press so that it can effectively promote a public interest culture. Instead of the present system in which press representatives on the PPC are all editors or publishers engaged in a calculated, damage limitation exercise, press representatives should be elected by their peers from different sections of the industry. This is likely to throw up professionally oriented candidates or at the very least representatives who have democratic legitimacy. At the same time, the role of the Press Commission should be broadened beyond that of responding to customer complaints to fostering professionalism. The Commission should be concerned with education, training, and research. It should publish an annual audit of the press, and seek to promote a critical dialogue about the practice of journalism (of a kind that is commonplace among broadcasters).

There is inevitably a tension between the two roles that are being proposed for the Press Commission. To fulfil its public adjudication role, the Press Commission needs to be independent. Yet in order to be an effective professionalizing agency, the Commission needs to be rooted in the industry. The best way to resolve this tension is for the new watchdog body to have, like the PPC, equal representation between the public and the press. However, public representatives should be representative of the public, rather than of the 'great'. Absurdly, the PPC's public representatives in 1966 consisted of six lords, two knights and a professor: an

élite grouping whose real purpose, in the eyes of publishers, was to keep the political establishment happy rather than to protect the public.

### Retrospect

In short, a programme of media reform should strengthen public service broadcasting, expand the civic media sector, tackle media concentration, and rethink media law. The specific proposals that have been advocated would make public service broadcasting less vulnerable to government pressure, less élite-oriented, more responsive to the diversity of the public and better able to produce high-quality programmes. More generally, the power of media controllers would be weakened by increasing the influence of staff. The diversity of the media would also be extended by helping resource-poor groups to launch and develop new projects. And finally, a new legal settlement would enhance both media freedom and public protection. Taken together, these reforms would help build a better media system: one with power *and* responsibility – but to the public rather than to media moguls and the state.

### Notes

- 1 *Media Ownership* (London, HMSO, 1995), p. 17.
- 2 *Report of the Committee on the Future of Broadcasting* (London, HMSO, 1977).
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- 4 G. Brandt (ed.) *Television Drama* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1981).
- 5 S. Livingstone and P. Lunt, *Talk on Television* (London, Routledge, 1994).
- 6 'Newsnight objectives 1995/6', internal BBC memorandum, 1995.
- 7 J. Curran, 'Television journalism: theory and practice. The case of *Newsnight*', in P. Holland, *Television Handbook* (London, Routledge, 1997).
- 8 See in particular, P. Schlesinger, *Putting 'Reality' Together* (London, Constable, 1978); T. Burns, *The BBC: Public Institution and Private World* (London, Macmillan, 1977); K. Kumar, 'Holding the middle ground: the BBC, the public, and the professional broadcaster', *Sociology*, 9, 3 (1975).
- 9 These estimates are based on the launch of the *Independent*, Live TV, and BSkyB.
- 10 *Pluralism and Media Concentration in the Internal Market* (Brussels, Commission of the European Communities, 1992), Table 4, p. 32
- 11 *Globalization of the Mass Media* (Washington, US Department of Commerce, 1993); *Europe and the Global Information Society* (Bangemann Report) (Brussels, European Council, 1994); *Parliamentary Debates*, 275 (84) (London, HMSO, 1996), pp. 538–610.
- 12 This proposal is a strengthened version of a recommendation of the *Royal Commission on the Press 1974–7 Final Report* (London, HMSO, 1977), p. 155.

- 13 J. Barron, *Freedom of the Press for Whom?* (Ontario: Midland, 1975); R. Horwitz, 'The First Amendment meets some new technologies: broadcasting, common carriers, and free speech in the 1990s', *Theory and Society*, 1991.
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