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FOR REFERENCE ONLY
The British News Media in a Time of Retrenchment

By

David Deacon

A Doctoral Thesis
Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements
For the award of

PhD of Loughborough University

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Abstract

This thesis examines the role of the British News Media in broader processes of state retrenchment that have occurred in Britain since the 1980s. This issue is examined through a range of empirical case studies, which are, respectively:

(a) news reporting of the introduction of the poll tax;
(b) news media relations and coverage of the voluntary and charitable sector;
(c) the mediation of social scientific research;
(d) trends in electoral news coverage;
(e) coverage of quasi-autonomous non governmental organisations.

Collectively, this work demonstrates the importance of communication and media factors in the systemic changes that have occurred over recent decades, and the need to attend to issues of context and process when theorising their nature and significance. The introduction also outlines the methodological and theoretical positions that have shaped this work.
Acknowledgements

My thanks to all my co-authors, not only for their academic contribution to the work presented here, but also for their collegiality. Particular thanks to Professor Peter Golding, who gave me my first research job and whose subsequent invitation to join him in his move to the Department of Social Sciences, Loughborough University transformed my opportunities and horizons. Also to Professor Alan Bryman who kindly agreed to act as my research supervisor for this thesis and whose advice has been of considerable value.

Thanks to all my other colleagues in the Department of Social Sciences, Loughborough University, in particular Jo Aldridge, Chris Dearden, John Downey, Mike Gane, Alastair Gordon, Jim McGuigan, Sabina Mihelj, Graham Murdock, Mike Pickering and Dominic Wring. Also to those working (or, in one case, retiring) in other locales, in particular Simon Cross, Arthur Gould, Sharon Lockyer, James Stanyer and Roger Dickinson.

Thanks and love to Jo, Luke and Jack and to my rapidly expanding, extended family. Particular thanks to Kay and Brian Aldridge, without whose babysitting, a lot of this work would never have been completed, and to my mother, June, who has always emphasised, and exemplified, the value of reading.

This Thesis is dedicated to the memory of Malcolm Martin Deacon
Introduction

The chapters contained in this thesis are publications based on more than sixteen years of research activity, and eight separate externally funded research projects. Before I discuss the threads that link this trail, it is necessary to give first a brief, description of the content of the thesis.

Chapters 1 to 3 examine the mainstream media’s role in reporting and influencing public debate about the introduction of a highly controversial form of local taxation: the Community Charge, or ‘poll tax’ (as it was more widely known). Chapter 4 presents an analysis of general trends in media reporting of voluntary and charitable organisations in the UK and examines their origins in journalistic practices and perceptions and in the communicative activities and competences of the voluntary organisations themselves. Chapters 5 to 7 all derive from an extensive investigation of the relationship between social scientists and the mainstream news media in the UK. Chapter 5 examines what I term ‘the Communication Environment’ of social science publicity related activity. Chapter 6 provides a detailed case study of a particular social science related news report, tracing the dynamics of its inception (based on interviewing the sources reported in the article), its mediation (based on a textual deconstruction of the piece and an interview with the journalist who wrote it) and its reception (based on focus group interviews with members of the public). Chapter 7 is a methodological reflection on the values and challenges of multi-method research, which uses issues and evidence from the social science study to illustrate these broader points. Chapters 8 and 9 present the findings of a sequence of content analyses of election reporting, which my colleagues and I have conducted on behalf of the Guardian newspaper for every UK general election since 1992. The following three chapters respectively examine: trends in the reporting of Quasi-Autonomous Non Governmental Organisations (a.k.a: ‘Quangos’) (Chapter 10), the publicity and news management activities of these public agencies (chapter 11) and journalists’ interactions with, and perceptions of, quasi governmental bodies (chapter 12). The final chapter is a theoretical discussion about how, and why, analysis of media production and consumption should be linked more closely.
At first sight, the connections between these research topics may not be apparent – apart from the banal observation that all have something to do with the mainstream news media. Certainly, I cannot pretend that these successive research projects are entirely the product of a carefully conceived strategic plan. Serendipity has also played its part in the evolution of my research career. One of these projects, which, from the writing of the research proposal to the submission of the last article, occupied nearly five years of my life, originated from a chance conversation with a colleague as we waited for the departmental kettle to boil. Another followed on from a casual enquiry made by a national journalist as to whether I could recommend anyone who could do content analysis.

In submitting for a doctorate by publication, one is using and fusing texts written for other audiences and other purposes. Therefore, one can excuse some unevenness of style (reflecting the differing editorial policies encountered and audiences addressed), and even some reiteration in the arguments and evidence presented. However, it is not sufficient simply to present a large amount of work. On a deeper level, the collated material must display sufficient coherence for the sum of the parts to be deemed worthy of the status of a doctoral thesis.

In the sections that follow I seek to identify the connections and continuities between these diverse projects, to demonstrate the thematic underpinnings of the thesis. I begin by addressing 'Retrenchment' and have privileged the concept in both the thesis title and this discussion because I believe it offers the clearest strand of continuity across the work presented.

Retrenchment

'Retrenchment' has both generic and specific uses. In the general sense, it has long been applied to describe any attempt at fiscal parsimony, no matter how limited. One thinks for example of the bewildered request made by Sir Walter Elliot at the start of Jane Austen's *Persuasion*, when, having
momentarily grasped the scale of his debts, he asked his loyal friend Lady Russell 'Can we retrench? Does it occur to you that there is any one article in which we can retrench?' (2001: 3). More recently, 'Retrenchment' has also been used more precisely to describe changes in systems of the social welfare provision of many advanced capitalist nations over recent decades, and in particular the ways in which attempts have been made to reduce public expenditure in this area (see Bonoli et al., 2000). In a useful theorisation, Pierson draws a distinction between 'programmatic' and 'systemic' retrenchment (1994: 15). 'Programmatic' retrenchment relates to specific attacks on existing social programmes that tend to be limited in their effects. 'Systemic' retrenchment operates in a longer term and less direct manner and is manifested in four contextual changes:

- Constraining the flow of revenues and generally reducing the funds available for the welfare state
- Modifying political institutions and changing the way decision-making is conducted, thereby changing policy outcomes.
- Weakening pro-welfare state interest groups
- Instigating a policy induced change in public opinion, designed to promote the public perceptions of the virtues of private provisions and weaken their attachments to public social provision

Several of the topics addressed within this thesis manifestly link to recent debates about 'state shrinkage'. The poll tax (see chapters 1 to 3) was a radical piece of state-craft that was designed to pressurise local authorities to reign back their expenditure. From the time it was first mooted, many commentators identified its profound constitutional ramifications, and how it would alter the power relationship between local and central government, in favour of the latter (See Deacon and Golding, 1994: 28-36). The conflict over the role and financing of local government (of which the poll tax debate was just one battle) was itself just one element in a broader reappraisal of social and welfare provision and funding in Britain during this period. As concerns
about levels of public expenditure grew and the crisis in values concerning state-welfare provision intensified, politicians and commentators from across the political spectrum started to advocate a more central role for voluntary and charitable organisations (see Chapter 4), whether as a means for achieving greater welfare pluralism or for facilitating a transformation towards arms length, anti-corporatist government, in which the role of the state changes from that of provider to enabler (e.g. Hadley and Hatch, 1981; Johnson, 1987). The rise of quasi-government through the 1980s, and after, is also intimately linked to wider processes of state retrenchment (see Chapters 10 to 12). As Matthew Flinders explains:

'The need to cut public spending, increase efficiency and exercise fiscal restraint has forced, and will continue to force, politicians to move away from traditional public sector organizations and towards more efficient, but democratically questionable semi-autonomous organisations: in a word, quangos' (Flinders, 1999: 3).

The other topics addressed in this thesis also connect with debates about 'retrenchment', albeit slightly more tangentially. For example, in the analysis provided of trends in media reporting of social science in the UK (see chapter 5) it is argued that any analysis of publicity and dissemination strategies of disparate sources of social scientific expertise needs to be located in an examination of the communication environment of the institutions that host and fund such activity. Here again we see considerable and consistent evidence of the impact of state retrenchment and restructuring since the 1960s, with funding agencies and host institutions having to cope with parlous finances and a changing regulatory environment.

The chapters on election reporting in the UK since 1992 are relevant to the retrenchment debate in that many sections of the British media, in particular the national popular press, ardently supported the values and policies of successive neo-liberal governments headed by Margaret Thatcher during the 1980s, and proved formidable political adversaries to interest groups and institutions perceived to obstruct the government's plans. As Andrew Gamble wrote at the height of the Thatcherite programme:
‘Crucial to the success that has been achieved is the degree of support that the Government has received from the media, in particular the newspapers. Since it is the newspapers that provide so much of the material and help fix the parameters for debates and news reporting on television, the active support given to the Thatcher Government by the great majority of the national press has been very important in sustaining the momentum of Thatcherism and projecting its policies as the only right and possible ones’ (1988: 216-217).

In the late 1990s many of these papers had an apparent change of heart in party political terms, and switched support to the Labour party. The analysis in chapter 8 considers whether this shift in allegiance demonstrated a deeper transition in their core, ideological values, and concludes that, although Conservative party affiliations may have wavered for many newspapers, neo-liberal values endured intact and many of the national press displayed frames of reference that remained broadly supportive of systemic retrenchment (‘individualism, euroscepticism, anti-unionism, anti-welfarism’ (Chapter 8, pp. 148-9)). Chapter 9 updates this piece and, in a broader analysis of media activity during the 2001 General Election, notes how the trend towards press dealignment (as opposed to realignment) was the most evident trend during the election.

Collectively, I believe three general conclusions about the media and retrenchment can be drawn from the work contained within this thesis. The first concerns the importance of media and communication issues when considering examples of ‘programmatic retrenchment’ (chapters 1-3) or ‘systemic retrenchment’ (chapters 4-12). Indeed, I would contend that the spread of ‘promotionalism’ in many capitalist nations (Wernik, 1991), in which diverse public and private agencies are now forced to ‘to give much higher priority to the publicity field’ (Blumer and Gurevitch, 1996: 127), has in large part been stimulated by retrenchment processes and the systemic instability that has resulted. Significantly, a recent survey of the public relations industry in the UK identified the privatisation programmes undertaken by the

1 Original page numberings are used whenever direct quotations are made from material presented as chapters in this thesis.
Conservative government in the 1980s as having been a key factor behind the industry’s explosive expansion during the same period (Miller and Dinan, 2001).

Unfortunately, the importance of media and communication is often underplayed in many conventional policy analyses. This tendency is clearly evident in several policy analyses of the implementation and repeal of the Poll Tax. Butler et al., in their dissection of the ‘human failure’ and ‘system failure’ at the heart of ‘a public policy failure of the first magnitude’ (1994: 302) concluded that, although ‘...the Poll Tax was a public relations disaster, the problem was inherent in the policy. It was not primarily a matter of presentation’ (1994: 264). Similarly, an earlier study of the Tax’s introduction in Scotland concluded that ‘The importance of presentation, relative to the real effect of the flat rate tax must not be exaggerated’ (Gibson, 1990: 241). The explanation of the policy’s failure advanced by Peter Golding and myself, whilst not ruling out the importance of material failings in the policy, takes issue with such explanations. In our view it was only possible to explain several crucial aspects of the policy’s implementation and abandonment by attending closely to the broader representation and political construction of the policy.

As we state in the introduction to the book

'[W]e are arguing that [the media] are inherently part of the modern policy process, which is inconceivable without the rhetorical and publicity apparatus of political communication. Thus to devolve so much of the essential character of the political process to a residual category of actions in the “environment” is to miss much of the core of what determines and shapes policy. It is still surprising how minimal an

2 For example, the shifting intensity of public attention to the tax discussed in Chapter 3 correlates weakly with the material implementation and impact of the poll tax. Also, there were many specific occasions where the emphases of media and public debate had a direct impact upon the form and structure of the policy, which in turn had profound material consequences. For instance, the Government’s decision to revise the self financing safety net arrangements in 1989 had nothing to do with the ‘real’ effects of the tax (implementation was seven months hence) but rather its inability to convince its own supporters and a hostile Tory press that such arrangements weren’t effectively subsidising Labour councils at Conservative councils’ expense. Conversely, Conservative central office’s successful redefinition of the party’s disastrous 1990 local election results as a vindication of the principle of the tax (see Bruce, 1991), not only temporarily stymied internal party dissent, media attention and public interest, but also (as Gibson concedes) directly influenced the outcome of the ministerial review then underway, ensuring ‘that the flat rate principle of the tax was retained’ (Gibson, 1990: 244).
appearance the media and communications make in many policy analyses. (Deacon and Golding, 1994: 8).

The second broad point to be made regarding the media and retrenchment is that many of the studies presented raise critical questions about the adequacy of the media’s performance in interpreting and explaining the complex questions raised by these retrenchment processes. For example, chapter 5 shows how coverage of voluntary activity tends to cluster around general and non-contentious areas of voluntary and charitable activity (e.g. children, animals and health) and to neglect organisations working in minority or contentious issue domains (e.g. the ‘black voluntary sector’). Despite voluntary organisations’ growing interest in campaigning and advocacy (NCVO, 1990), most receive coverage for their deeds (fund raising, doing good works, etc.) than for their political interventions (raising topics, adjudicating upon the views or actions of others, providing information, etc.). And although instances of direct media criticism are rare, scant attention has been given to the broader political questions raised by the expanding role and importance of the voluntary sector in Britain (e.g. concerns about ensuring appropriate levels of public accountability in what is now a multi-billion pound sector, and the implications of a transition from a grant to a contract based system of statutory sector funding). The overall picture that emerges is of limited but indulgent media treatment, based on some antiquated premises.

Questions about the impact of systemic retrenchment have been appreciably more evident in media coverage of quangos, although this attention is highly episodic, restricted and has flagged over the recent period (see chapter 10, pp: 49-55). In principle, journalists are highly sceptical about the increased ‘quasification’ of government and public service (quangos have now replaced unions as media hate-figures), but this does not translate into a routine hostility in the treatment of specific agencies and their work. Organisations that can be legitimately described as ‘quangos’, are rarely labelled in those terms, and are most commonly reported in a descriptive, unconnected and uncontested manner - engaged in public debate, but not in a way that draws them directly into the political fray (see Chapter, 10, pp: 59-63). This tendency
is also echoed in journalistic talk about their interactions with these kinds of public bodies (see Chapter 12, pp: 346-351). In many respects, this feature of news coverage replicates the 'new managerialist' ideologies advanced to legitimise the existence of these public bodies - such as, they enable complex policy matters to be dealt with in dedicated arenas of expertise, and reduce the distorting impact of short-term party political manoeuvring on rational policy formulation and implementation. Overall, there seems to be a conspicuous absence of joined-up thinking among journalists in their treatment of quangos in practice and their view of them in principle (see chapter 12: 351).

In the case of the poll tax, mainstream media coverage ignored many fundamental questions about the broader effects of the text (e.g. disenfranchisement issues, privacy concerns and its impact upon local government autonomy) (see chapter 1, pp: 308-312). The national media, in particular, signally failed to anticipate the impact the policy would have prior to its implementation (see also Chapter 3, pp: 192-196).

The third and final point regarding the media and retrenchment is that, whatever the 'interpretative' deficiencies of media coverage, these studies also reveal the dangers of over-generalising about the 'evaluative' disposition of different media towards retrenchment, whether programmatic or systemic.

Many studies over the years have identified the conservative ideological instincts of much of the mainstream media in the UK, and, as already noted, many news editors, journalists and proprietors in the 1980s embraced

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3 The differentiation between media interpretations and evaluations is a recurring theme through many of the chapters presented in this thesis. This distinction was first suggested by Peter Golding in a chapter on the media and citizenship (1990) and I have found it an enormously useful heuristic device for differentiating between levels of media and public discourse. In its original formulation, Golding explains the distinction in the following way: 'The evaluative dimensions addresses whether the media account is pro or anti the policy issue or matter being described... The interpretative dimension asks what aspects of the policy are broadcast into the public domain, what is the issue seen to be about.' (1990: 97)

4 for example in the reporting of industrial relations (GUMG, 1976, 1980; Philo, 1990), poverty and welfare provision (Golding and Middleton, 1982), law and order (Hail et al, 1978), ethnicity (Hartmann and Husband, 1974), and public opinion more generally (Lewis, 2001).
Thatcherism with unbridled enthusiasm and gave valuable impetus to the project. However, even during that period, there were other news media that, whether by simply observing the ideals of objectivity and pluralism or by pursuing actively an alternative political agenda, provided significant fora for the cultivation and communication of counter-discourses. Furthermore, there have been other occasions when even neo-liberal media organisations have responded unpredictably to aspects or specific instances of state retrenchment. An example of this is offered by the introduction of the Poll Tax, whose implementation in England and Wales in April 1990 stimulated excoriating media criticism from across the political spectrum, including the right wing press (see Chapters 1-3).

These occasions do not in my view contradict broader observations about the residual conservatism of substantial sections of the British news media, as these are typically examples of ideological failures 'on their own terms'. Nevertheless, they do alert us to the need to avoid assuming that mainstream media always facilitate and endorse retrenchment processes. There are many cases where professional practices, political preferences and, simply, the sheer unpredictability of events can lead them to assume quite a negative stance.

Process and Context

Although the concept of retrenchment is widely invoked in discussions about modern welfare systems, it has been criticised in some quarters. Some claim it tends to be invoked in an overly deterministic and non-contextualised way (e.g. Feigenbaum et al, 1999), and others argue that it is more appropriate to talk of state 'restructuring' rather than 'retrenchment', as decades of reform have changed the institutional mechanisms of welfare production but have not significantly reduced levels of social protection (e.g. Trommel and de Vroom, 2002). These kinds of observations and qualifications resonate with some of

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See also the hostile editorial response of newspapers like the Sun and Daily Mail to the government's announcements of its pit closure plans in 1992 (Negrine, 1996) and the widespread media hostility towards the effects of rail privatisation.
those I have already made about the media's role in retrenchment processes, in particular the need to recognise the contingent elements that can affect and alter media behaviour and dispositions. This, in turn, reveals a second underlying theme that unites the component parts of this thesis: the need to pay close attention to the complexities of 'process' and 'context' when theorising media behaviour. By 'process' I am referring to temporal aspects and comparisons: the impact of change over time. By 'context' I am referring to spatial aspects and comparisons: the impact of change in location (e.g. geographic locations, institutional arenas, etc). I discuss these distinctions more extensively in chapters 6 and 13, but for the purposes of this introduction I believe it is appropriate to identify the relevance of these distinctions to the work presented within it.

Many of the studies in this thesis can be described as media agenda-building studies: that is, they seek to explain the complex dynamics that produce specific and general discourses evident in news coverage in particular subject areas. This has required a considerable amount of interviewing and survey work, not only among journalists and media professionals, but also the individuals and institutions that they routinely access in producing their texts. As such, much of this work can be readily located within the growing literature concerning 'the sociology of media sources' (for two excellent recent reviews see Manning, 2001 and Cottle, 2003). In their different ways, studies in this paradigm have identified the need to look beyond the news media and to understand how the political motives and strategies of media sources have a formative influence in the production of media discourse. This need has become ever more important, as source organisations have become more aware of, and adroit in, publicity and media management strategies.

This developing literature has influenced the ways in which the politics of media access are now theorised. In particular, one can detect a dissatisfaction with critical perspectives that are too deterministic in their estimation of the power of social and political elites to exert hegemonic power via the mass media. As Simon Cottle remarks:
'Complexity and contingency are found where once social dominance alone were assumed to guarantee successful news entry... [recent news source studies] point to the multiple factors and political contingencies that unfold through time and that cannot, therefore, be easily predicted in advance nor better understood without recourse to empirical investigation' (2000: 436)

Such challenges have even extended to the most sophisticated critical models, such as the Primary definition model advanced by Hall et al in their 1978 study Policing the Crisis. To quote a brief section from chapter six of this thesis:

'Within this new research framework, the power of 'primary definition' is not seen as an axiomatic expression of the social structure, but rather 'an achievement' (Schlesinger, 1990) gained through successful strategic action. Although agencies of the state and other powerful political and economic elites obviously enjoy considerable advantages in getting their messages across, their definitional control is neither absolute nor predetermined. Tensions within political systems, journalistic acuteness, internal state disputes, and successful intervention by non official sources can all combine to 'open up' media debate on certain issues, on certain occasions' (Chapter 6: 9)

It is interesting to reflect upon why sensitivities to these issues have developed over recent years. It could be that they simply reflect a growing theoretical sophistication and perspicacity in the field, but my feeling is that other factors are at play. In particular, I believe that media and systemic changes over the recent period have been key factors in this theoretical revision. In his highly influential critique of Hall's primary definition model, Philip Schlesinger argues that the model is atemporal 'for it tacitly assumes the permanent presence of certain forces in the power structure' (1990: 67). In my view, this represents a tacit acknowledgement that although its validity has been eroded by events, it once provided a convincing account of the media's subsidiary role in a stable, corporatist political system. This appears to be the view of James Curran in his explanation of the discrepant conclusions of Hall.

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6 Schlesinger wrote his critique in the late 1980s towards the end of Margaret Thatcher's tenure as British Prime Minister. Hall et al's analysis was developed in the early 1970s when the prospect of a neo liberal onslaught on the welfare system and union sector was, at most, only a dim possibility.
Thus Stuart Hall and his colleagues (1978) show how in the early 1970s the press responded to a closed loop of news sources – the police, judiciary and politicians – who fostered a moral panic about muggers, and promoted a repressive law and order agenda. Yet, Schlesinger and Tumber (1994) show how law and order had become almost two decades later a highly contested terrain in which effective pressure groups, with significant political and other allies gained access to the press (especially the broadsheets) and opened up a fusillade of criticism concerned with prison reform, police violence and miscarriages of justice’ (1997: 90).

In considering the extent of the transformations that have occurred it could even be argued that one of the founding propositions of the primary definition model - that the media represent ‘secondary definers’ who, in seeking to produce objective and authoritative accounts, defer to the versions of reality promulgated by political and social elites – has effectively been reversed. As the tendrils of ‘media logic’ become ever more pervasive and politics becomes dependent ‘in its central functions on mass media’ (Mazzolena and Schulz, 1999: 250), it could be claimed that many political elites are now becoming more like secondary definers, aware that their political actions require direct engagement with a publicity field that ‘is dominated by the standards of journalism to which their own media-destined material must conform’ (Blumler and Gurevitch, 1996: 127). Whether this is actually the case or not, the possibility of this change highlights the need to address process when theorising the interface between media systems and political systems. Furthermore, it shows that the invocation of temporal factors cannot be left as vague sociological abstractions, they must be rooted in a precise historicity. Only by doing so can we appreciate the media’s complex role in social and cultural reproduction, in affecting what changes and what endures.

To suggest that politicians are now ‘secondary definers’ is an extreme claim, and I am conscious of the dangers in falling victim to an unwarranted media centrom. Certainly, the various studies contained within this thesis show that the extent of ‘communications dependency’ varies across different institutional
sectors and domains and we always need to be aware of the importance of context, to avoid making unsustainable generalisations. Consider, for example, the differences between electoral politics and appointive politics that are discussed in chapters 11 and 12. Although the findings presented in these chapters confirm that many quasi-governmental bodies have become increasingly concerned with their marketing and promotion, there is far less evidence of the conflict and populist imperative that is affecting political communication in the electoral domain (See Barnett and Gaber, 2001). As is noted in chapter 12:

'Although many agencies recognised a paternalistic responsibility to communicate with the public, they seemed less concerned about courting public opinion. In contrast, concerns about impression management and self-promotion were more evident in up-line and (to some extent) 'sideways' communication. This pattern seems to reflect the particular nature and status of quasi-governmental organisations. As non-elected bodies, they are considerably (but not completely) insulated from the power of public opinion. However, as appointed bodies, quangos need to demonstrate their effectiveness to their patrons, at the same time as convincing other influential opinion leaders of their operational independence and effectiveness. High levels of positive coverage in prestigious media sectors assist both these objectives' (Chapter 11: 45)

This provides an example of the importance of addressing the context of political communication when discussing the politics of media access (i.e. in this case, the differences between electoral and appointive government). Furthermore, it raises questions about how we organise such spatial comparisons. For example, in the majority of comparative political communication studies, the nation state remains the key unit of analysis, but this research highlights the importance of attending to intra-national variation as well as inter-national differences.

Production and Reception – Towards a Holistic Approach

As noted, most of the studies presented in this thesis focus upon questions of news production. However issues concerning news reception and influence are not completely absent. Chapter 3 provides an extensive secondary
analysis of public opinion data related to the Poll Tax and the media, and Chapter 6 reports the findings of an original reception analysis of audience readings of one example of social science coverage. I believe these cases provide persuasive evidence about both the nature of media influence and the extent of audience resistance. For example regarding the poll tax, public opposition to the tax was evident from the outset and no amount of government spin and news management was able to dislodge that antipathy. In contrast, media opinion, particularly at national level, was initially more divided on the merits of the proposal, and it was only comparatively late in the policy cycle that all vestiges of media support evaporated. In this respect, one might argue that public opinion had more of an influence on media opinion, rather than vice versa. However, when we look at opinion poll data that assessed the extent of public understanding of this complex taxation reform and their changing assessment of its political salience, some dramatic links with media coverage become apparent. Public priorities and news priorities correlated remarkably closely, and associated evidence produced by other aspects of the study strongly indicates that media definitions had a considerable impact on public perceptions (see Chapter 3: 193-5).

The reception analysis presented in chapter 6 of audience readings of a single news item on a British Psychological Society report on the so-called 'False Memory Syndrome' found plenty of evidence of audience scepticism about the subject matter of the news item and the news sources presented within it. However, when we assessed their understanding of the preferred reading in the item (which we had identified on the basis of a combinatory analysis of the text itself, interviews with the journalist who wrote it and the sources he accessed), we found no evidence of a semiotic free-for-all in audience decodings. Rather:

'The details reveal a marked consistency between intended meaning at the point of production and audience understanding and interpretation of the text. This is not to say that audience members passively deferred to the text – on the contrary, we found substantial evidence of independent thought and scepticism. However, the 'distinctiveness of decoding' in this instance occurred at the evaluative rather than interpretative level. Resistance to the message did not lead to a
renegotiation of it. It was interrogated but not expanded.' (Chapter 6: 28)

In both of these examples, my colleagues and I took great care to avoid proposing a crude 'transmission' model of media influence (not least, because this is not supported by the findings). Nevertheless, I completely concur with John Corner's view that influence should remain 'an indispensable point of reference... Once we stop asking questions about it... a great deal of purpose disappears from whatever other questions we choose to ask about the media, especially those about interpretation' (2000: 394-5)

When addressing matters of media influence, once again, issues concerning process and context seem to me to be of pivotal significance. Indeed, I believe it is actually unhelpful to talk about audience power and media power in overly general ways, as this balance will depend on a range of socially, culturally and historically specific factors (e.g. questions of genre, the extent to which a topic is already embedded in media and popular discourse, the degree of intensity and closure in media discourse around it, and the availability of alternative repertoires of expertise and experience). Moreover, such understanding can only be achieved through the cultivation of a 'holistic' analysis of media production and consumption, in which questions about different elements of 'the totality formed by the social relations of the communication process as a whole' (Hall, 1993: 3) are consciously and directly related to each other. This need for greater integration provides the theoretical context for the empirical study presented in Chapter 6 and is the central concern of the theoretical discussion presented in Chapter 13.

A Methodological Note

There is also a methodological strand that links the work presented in this thesis. These various studies demonstrate cumulatively my commitment to the advancement of theory through empirical investigation. When I recollect my very earliest interests as an under-graduate, I am rather surprised to have arrived at such a juncture. I was initially both suspicious of, and uninspired by, empirical research and, when I read C Wright Mills' critique of 'abstracted
empiricism' in *The Sociological Imagination* (1959), felt I had all the justification I needed to avoid and disparage such activity. It took time and experience to appreciate the force and validity of his accompanying criticism of 'grand theorising' and to recognise that if beautiful theories are never to be disciplined by ugly facts then we descend into a relativistic vortex in which the only criteria that remain to assess the validity and integrity of theoretical postulations are essentially aesthetic in nature.

In broad terms, there are three related characteristics in respect of my approach to empirical research. Firstly, I am a pragmatist when it comes to deploying methods to investigate a particular topic. For example, in several of the studies presented here I have utilised traditional quantitative content analysis. I have not done so because I believe it to be the most intrinsically valid, rigorous or 'truthful' form of textual analysis, but because my research interests have often focused on matters concerning the macro contours of media discourse and it is the method most suited to charting broad patterns of significant presence and absence. As Brian Winston correctly observes,

>'Content analysis remains the only tool for establishing maps, however faulty, of television output... Without 'the map', no case can be sustained as to any kind of cultural skewedness except on the basis of one-off examples of misrepresentation or libel (which are not the norm). And if no case can be made, then there is no case to answer' (1990: 62)

Secondly, at the core of this pragmatism is a rejection of the proposition that methodology and epistemology exist in an iron embrace. Quantitative content analysis may have its roots in early 20th Century positivism, but to extrapolate from this that any person who utilises the method is therefore a positivist is specious, in my view. The epistemological test surely resides in the kinds of truth claims made on the basis of evidence generated by a particular method, and also any additional claims one might make about the preordained primacy of a particular method.

The third defining characteristic of my work is a commitment towards 'multi method' analysis, in particular the integration of qualitative and quantitative...
research methods (see also Deacon et al, 1999). Chapter 7 specifically discusses the benefits and challenges that arise from such methodological eclecticism, drawing on examples from our extensive study into social science reporting and the challenges we faced in reconciling findings produced using different methodologies that, on first examination, seemed to contradict each other. The main argument advanced in the article is that where such tensions occur it is incumbent on the analyst to 'deal with the difference' rather than ignore it or retreat to a position of epistemic prioritisation, in which evidence generated by a particular method is seen as inherently more valid, reliable and 'truthful'.

Concluding Remarks on Authorship

Many of the chapters in this thesis were published as joint authored pieces. The precise reference details are listed on the contents page. I have been extremely fortunate to have worked with such gifted and generous colleagues and I owe them all a considerable debt of thanks for the opportunities, insights and support they have provided over the last decade and a half. Given this, it feels somewhat invidious to have to claim main custody of jointly authored pieces, but it is necessary in order to demonstrate originality and coherence in my work.

When selecting pieces for this thesis, I applied four tests to all my joint authored publications before considering them for inclusion:

1. That I had sole or substantial responsibility for all elements of research design connected with the research presented in the publication.
2. That I had sole or substantial responsibility for all the associated data collection.
3. That I had sole or substantial responsibility for all the associated data analysis.
4. That I had sole or principal responsibility for the theoretical development and writing of the article.
All of the jointly authored chapters included here meet these criteria and their inclusion in this thesis has been approved by my co-authors. As an addendum, however, I feel it is only fair that I clearly identify where substantial parts of some of the chapters were written by colleagues. These are:

1. **Chapter 1: 'When Ideology Fails'**
   (i) page 291, paragraph 1 to page 293, paragraph 2,
   (ii) Page 297 start of paragraph 1 to page 298, end of paragraph 1: both written by Peter Golding

2. **Chapter 6: 'From Inception to Reception: The Natural History of a News Item'**.
   (i) Page 6, start of paragraph 6 to page 8, end of paragraph 2 - written by Alan Bryman.
   (ii) Page 20, start of paragraph 2 to page 24, end of paragraph 4 - written by Natalie Fenton

3. **Chapter 7: 'Collision or Collusion: A Discussion and Case Study of the Unplanned Triangulation of Quantitative and Qualitative Research Methods'**,
   (i) page 47 to page 51, end of paragraph 2, written by Alan Bryman
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When Ideology Fails: The Flagship of Thatcherism and the British Local and National Media

David Deacon and Peter Golding

This article examines the relationship between government and media in the promotion of substantial policy innovations. Taking the general case of 'Thatcherism' in the UK, it draws on research into media coverage of the Community Charge, a major shift in the fiscal basis of local government, in the last years of the Thatcher administration. The research suggests that, despite growing media conglomeration and state centralization, it is important to examine both local and national media to explore persistent diversity, and analyses the limits to government public relations effectiveness.

The early and marked centralization of communications in the United Kingdom has often been noted. The metropolitan dominance of both transport networks and newspaper publishing have ensured that media consumption is probably more uniform and national in the UK than in any other European country.

This has particular significance in the context of two more recent trends. The first is the growing concentration of ownership in the media industries. While figures like Murdoch and Maxwell are only the most prominent and compelling illustrations of this process, the underlying picture is clear. In early 1991, 88 percent of national daily newspaper circulation and 77 percent of Sunday circulations were controlled by the three largest chains, each of them significant multi-media corporations. Coupled with this familiar industrial process, however, has been a second trend within the political system, namely the increasingly centralized state, in which the power of the executive and the dirigiste inclinations of the state have waxed steadily towards the 'free market/strong state' model which many saw as exemplified by 'Thatcherism' (Gamble, 1988).

*David Deacon is a Research Officer and Peter Golding is Professor of Sociology in the Department of Social Sciences, Loughborough University.

Such a process is never monolithic, however. Regionalism, in varying forms, remains a significant feature of the British cultural and political landscape. This is reflected in the media system. Local radio is possibly the fastest growing sector in the British media, while in commercial television broadcasting, the regional structure imposed when it was introduced in 1955 remains intact, and in the 1991 round of applications for franchises companies have fallen over themselves to demonstrate their roots in and commitments to the region whose broadcasting franchise they were seeking.

Certainly the local and regional press has declined in numbers since its peak in the inter-war period. But there are still about 900 regional and local papers in the UK, plus a similar number of ‘freesheets’ (newspapers subsisting on advertising revenue and distributed free to households). Nearly 7.5 million copies of morning or evening local and regional papers are sold every day in the UK, not including the weekly and Sunday regional press (Press Council, 1990). Despite the high penetration of national newspapers to households in general, national readership is, of course, distributed among a number of titles. Conversely, where, as is common, the majority of households in a given locality is reading a local paper, it is the same paper as often as not, given the norm of local monopoly. The power of the local press for local agenda-setting is formidable.

This structure poses problems for a state exceptionally concerned with political public relations, and provides the backdrop for the case study we present here. Our concern is with the introduction of the Community Charge by the Thatcher government. This fiscal innovation was intended as a major reform of local taxation, by moving from a property tax to a tax on each adult in a locality, based on calculations of local spending needs formulated by central government and without the banding or progressiveness linking tax burden to ability to pay associated with income taxation.

Our interest in this topic extends beyond the contentious political issues raised by the new tax, for its implementation and subsequent abandonment have provided an invaluable opportunity to explore broader principles involved in the communication and formation of public policy. As a major innovation in fiscal policy with broad constitutional and political implications, the Community
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Charge was introduced against a background of considerable opposition. The government energetically promoted the change and citizens have been principally dependent on the media for information about it (MORI, 1989; Welsh Consumer Council, 1989). How did such promotion occur, and with what effects? What form have public discussions taken and with what effect on policy formation? And how far has the media catered for a full public discussion of such a major legislative innovation? In this article we examine what preferred readings of the Community Charge have been offered in local and national media coverage. The findings presented here are preliminary, and draw on work in progress. Indeed the process itself is not yet complete as the moribund and now condemned tax eats away at the political endurance of the Conservative government.

The Community Charge: A Brief History
In 1984, Patrick Jenkin, then Secretary of State for the Environment, announced to a rapturous audience at the Conservative Party Conference that his government had resolved to act on a long-standing political commitment to reform the basis of British local government finance. From the publication of the reform proposals in January 1986, through the 1987 General Election, when the reforms were labelled the 'flagship' of the Conservative electoral campaign, to the announcement of its abolition in March 1991, the 'Community Charge' has been at the forefront of domestic political debate in Britain.

The Community Charge, widely dubbed the poll tax, represented a major fiscal innovation. The previous property-based system of local domestic taxation was replaced by a flat rate, per capita 'charge'. In addition to this change in individual taxation, the levying and distribution of non-domestic rates were placed under central government control (the Uniform Business Rate), and changes were made to the assessment and distribution of central government grants. A complicated system of 'safety nets' and other transitional arrangements was also introduced to temporarily obviate the profound redistributive effects of these changes.

A meeting of Local Government Finance Officers in 1988 was told that the reforms '... could turn out to be the biggest political issue in post-war British history'. In the eyes of its sponsoring minister,
The new system will bring a new atmosphere to local politics. By giving people a clear sign of the costs of local services they will be more inclined to turn out and vote in local elections and to vote on local, not national issues. That will be good for local democracy. (Hansard, 16 December 1987: cols 1118–19)

The Opposition considered that the Bill introducing the Community Charge 'contains proposals of the most profound importance for all the people of Britain... It is a threat to democracy itself' (Hansard, 16 December 1987: cols 1127, 1131).

In the event, the Community Charge has proved singularly unpopular. Any initial public equivocation about the proposals rapidly transformed into outright hostility as the regressive, redistributive effects of the new impost became apparent. By 1990, national opinion polls revealed opposition to the Community Charge at around 70 percent and the tax to be perceived by the electorate as the most salient political issue. In the month preceding its introduction in England and Wales in 1990, public anger translated into widespread demonstrations across Britain, some of which escalated into serious breaches of public order.

Since then the new tax has proved an electoral liability for the Conservative Party, precipitating a string of disastrous by-election defeats and threatening the future of their administration. By March 1991, the sheer consistency and intensity of public hostility forced the government into one of the most dramatic U-turns in contemporary British politics, when the Secretary of State for the Environment announced that the 'electoral flagship' of the Conservative Party was to be scuttled and replaced by a property-based system. It was an emphatic and extraordinary admission of the failure of the Community Charge, both as a policy initiative and a public relations exercise.

The Selling of the Community Charge

You will almost certainly have read about the new Community Charge in the papers, or heard about it on television. You will probably have seen it called the poll tax, but the Community Charge is its real name. (Department of the Environment publicity pamphlet, January 1989)

As we survey the wreckage of this ill-starred fiscal venture, it is easy to forget the initial enthusiasm with which the Conservative administration promoted its merits to a bemused and unconvinced electorate. Certainly, if the government failed 'to get the message
across' about the Community Charge — as many a bewildered minister has been forced to concede over recent months — it was not for the lack of effort or expenditure. As has been the case with other of their policy initiatives, the government engaged in a substantial public relations exercise to explain and promote the new system.

In October 1987 the Department of the Environment and the Central Office of Information issued a 12-page booklet: ‘Paying for Local Government — the Need for Change’. Essentially a precis of the main arguments in the 1986 Green Paper, the booklet contrasted the perceived merits of the Community Charge and Uniform Business Rate with the inadequacies of the rating system, local income tax and increased central government control of local finance. It concluded with the confident prediction that the reforms would provide 'a greater say' and 'a fairer share' for all in local government.

This was followed in January 1989 by an attractive booklet entitled 'You and the Community Charge: Your Step by Step Guide'. Although initial criticisms were made about the limited availability of the booklet (Local Government Chronicle, 20 January 1989) it was supplemented a few months later by a more comprehensive PR campaign: 23 million leaflets — 'The Community Charge (the So-Called Poll Tax): How it Will Work for You' — were distributed to every household in England and Wales, at a total cost of £1.78 million (Guardian, 11 May 1989). In the immediate months preceding the tax's introduction in England and Wales, the advertising agency Ogilvy and Mather was commissioned to conduct a nationwide advertising campaign on Community Charge Benefits, taking in TV, press and magazines at a final cost of £3.1 million (Campaign, 6 April 1990). Furthermore, in January 1990 the Department of the Environment used Inland Revenue computer records to send literature to all 1.5 million businesses in England, explaining the operation and merits of the new Uniform Business Rate (DoE News Release, 1990, No. 30).

Although ostensibly designed to inform the general public, these publicity initiatives attracted considerable controversy for their alleged inaccuracies and partisan nature. In May 1989, the National Association of Citizens Advice Bureaux refused to distribute the 'Step by Step Guide' to the poll tax through their advice centres because it was felt the booklet '... was setting out an essentially political argument about the charge without giving
the other side of the argument' (Guardian, 13 May 1989:2). Coincidentally, the blanket distribution of the Community Charge leaflet was temporarily halted by a High Court injunction following allegations that the leaflet deliberately misled the public. Greenwich Council claimed the leaflet was 'potentially misleading' because it failed to mention the joint liability of spouses and cohabiters for each other's Community Charge, and therefore '. . . did not accord with the Government's conventions and Standards for publications of this sort' (The Times, 17 May 1989:24). (The injunction was subsequently lifted after the government appealed.)

Later in the same year, and in spite of assurance by the Chairman of Ogilvy and Mather that their Poll Tax benefits campaign would have 'no slogans, no gimmicks and no logos' (Campaign, 24 November 1989:1), confidential correspondence between Local Authority Associations and the Department of the Environment revealed concerns that the adverts would amount to 'a soft, subliminal selling of the poll tax', by giving a false impression of the actual availability of rebates under the new system (Guardian, 15 December 1989:2).

Not surprisingly, Opposition politicians were particularly vituperative in their condemnation of these PR initiatives. In 1987, Jeff Rooker, then Labour's Local Government Spokesperson, claimed the publication of 'The Need for Change' booklet contravened 1985 Cabinet guidelines that stipulated such publications should only be issued after the publication of a Bill or White Paper, or with the agreement of the Opposition Chief Whip (at the time only a Green Paper had been published). Jack Cunningham, Labour's Environment Spokesperson, later denounced the Step by Step Guide to the poll tax as 'a shameful use of taxpayers' resources for propaganda to make poll tax seem more acceptable. . . [That] contrasts markedly with the increased restrictions on local government publicity' (Local Government Chronicle, 20 January 1989:8). In a similar vein, David Blunkett, Labour's Local Government spokesperson said of the 1990 rebate campaign 'There is justified anxiety as to the exact nature of the Government's publicity campaign. . . Soft selling the poll tax would be a gross misuse of taxpayers' money' (Guardian, 15 December 1989:2).

Direct advertising and PR initiatives of the type outlined have formed but one element of the government's public relations offensive over the Community Charge. The government is clearly
familiar with theories of two-step flow, and concentrated a substantial amount of effort in pursuing indirect publicity through the media.

In September 1987, Local Government ministers Michael Howard and Christopher Chope embarked on a whistle-stop tour to impress on local worthies around the country the value and inevitability of the poll tax (see Golding, forthcoming). The tour was aimed at areas where political considerations demanded a careful and forceful marketing of the new system. Only one national press release was issued during the tour (DoE News Release 369, 1987), but enormous efforts were targeted at local newspaper editors, using a specially made video, fact packs and ritzy presentations. Eight special fact sheets were also produced in an effort to ensure, as Michael Howard's press release prior to the tour put it, 'that people should get a clear idea of how it will work' (DoE News Release 343, 1987).

A later and somewhat less ambitious government initiative aimed at the media occurred in May 1989, when civil servants from the Department of the Environment and the Central Office of Information faxed 'ready made' articles written by John Gummer, then Minister for Housing and Planning, to local newspapers across England (The Times, 13 May 1989). On at least two occasions, the format of the Minister's article was specifically tailored to respond to critical comments that had been made locally by Opposition politicians. In one local press article the Minister condemned criticisms made by a Labour MP about the likely impact of the new tax on local households as 'heartless scaremongering' (Nottingham Evening Post, 9 May 1989). In another local newspaper article, the Minister sarcastically suggested that 'someone should explain to the City's chairman of finance how the new system will work' (Leicester Mercury, 9 May 1989).

Although a spokesperson for the Department of the Environment insisted the articles were merely intended to correct misconceptions and 'misleading comments' about the Community Charge, the targeted criticism of Opposition MPs created considerable outrage. In Leicester, the City Council were stung into releasing a news release of their own which highlighted '...the possible misuse by the Government of civil servants and public money to run a politically biased campaign on the new poll tax' (Leicester City Council News Release, 11 May 1989). The Labour
Local Government Spokesperson went even further, stating, 'the fact that civil servants are not only being used to promote propaganda, but also to attack individual opposition politicians takes the issue on from the abuse of taxpayers' money and into the realms of constitutional impropriety' (Labour Parliamentary News Release, 12 May 1989). In the House of Commons, another Opposition MP questioned, 'is it one of the supreme ironies of history that at the same time as the Tory benches are praising President Gorbachev for trying to separate the party from the state, they are doing the same in Britain?' (Hansard, 16 May 1989: Col. 186).

Given the attention the government gave to public relations and the media when introducing the Community Charge, the question automatically arises as to how successful they were in recruiting editorial support for their policy. In the following sections we examine how the poll tax was reported in a range of different local and national media. Specifically, we consider four issues. How did the coverage develop over the four-year period between the first presentation of the reform proposals and their introduction in England and Wales? How did the media label the government's initiative? Which individuals and institutions were most prominently featured in the coverage? And what were the main themes and issues presented in the coverage? Collectively, these findings provide a comprehensive measure of the range and tenor of media reporting, and in particular of the success or otherwise of the government's agenda-building efforts.

The results we present are derived from the analysis of a wide range of broadcast and press content. The overview of poll tax reporting since 1986 is based on analysis of coverage from three national 'quality' newspapers (the Guardian, The Times and the Sunday Times). The other results are derived from the combined analysis of a wide variety of local and national media content produced between 20 February 1990 and 5 May 1990 (the period leading up to the introduction of the poll tax in England and Wales, through to the local government elections held in the first week of May).

Six local areas were selected as the basis for the local media sample, and their selection was determined by a range of criteria (e.g. level of Community Charge, political complexion and geographic location). The local broadcast sample comprised the BBC and ITV weekday, regional, evening news programmes. The
local press sample contained nineteen daily and weekly local newspapers distributed in the six sample areas.

The national newspaper sample, in addition to the Guardian, The Times and Sunday Times, included three popular tabloid papers: the Daily Mirror, the Sun and the Daily Mail. The national broadcast sample incorporated coverage from BBC Radio 4, BBC Radio 1 and the main evening news bulletins from the four national television channels (BBC1, BBC2, ITV and Channel 4). Any item that directly mentioned the reforms to local government finance introduced by the 1988 Local Government Finance Act was included in the analysis—even if the reforms were mentioned incidentally. As we are concerned in this paper with the nature of editorial coverage of the poll tax and related reforms, we have not included readers’ letters and advertisements in our analysis.

Media Reporting of the Community Charge

The Evolution of the Poll Tax Debate
In Figure 1, we see the distribution of poll tax related stories in the national quality press from the first presentation of the reform proposals in 1986 to its implementation in April 1990. The most noticeable aspect of this distribution is the unprecedented explosion of coverage during March and, to a lesser extent, April 1990. Indeed, more poll tax related items were published in the nine-week period between 1 March and 5 May 1990 than for the whole of the previous year. Up until then this profoundly significant fiscal reform had received comparatively little media attention. The previous highest peak occurred in April 1988 when the 1988 Local Government Finance Bill was in its last stages, and Conservative revolts in the House of Commons and House of Lords threatened to destroy the government’s proposals.

Particularly interesting is the paucity of coverage during the lead-up to the British General Election in June 1987. Indeed, there was significantly more coverage of the issue the following month, once the electoral die had been cast. Considering the poll tax’s status as the ‘flagship’ of the Conservative election manifesto, its marginalization in the pre-election agenda is remarkable. However, whether its absence could be construed as a ‘failure’ on the part of the government to provide their flagship policy with a high media profile is a moot point. Indeed, there seems to have been something of a conspiracy of silence about the issue by the
FIGURE 1
National Newspaper Poll Tax Coverage (January 1986–April 1990)
main protagonists in the election campaign, which would help explain the lack of coverage. The poll tax received only a brief mention in the Conservative manifesto document, and the party focused most of its energies during the campaign on attacking Labour's defence and taxation policies (Miller et al., 1990). The Labour party, too, made little mention of the issue in the election, making just one peripheral reference to the poll tax in their pre-election broadcasts (Observer, 26 March 1991). According to Pimlott (1988), there were three reasons why Labour ignored the issue. Firstly, the full impact of the tax was not clearly understood at that time. Secondly, it was assumed that the system would not be fully operational for at least ten years. Thirdly, Labour was reluctant to raise the sensitive subject of local authority spending at such a crucial time. Whatever the reasons for the media's neglect of the Community Charge during the general election campaign, this particular finding does offer an interesting perspective on the oft heard complaint from disillusioned Conservative voters that they never would have supported the party had they known what was in store for them.

Public opinion about the Community Charge very closely matched the ebb and flow of media coverage. Figure 2 shows how public perceptions of the salience of the poll tax similarly increased dramatically in March 1990 and then fell away in the following months. This would appear to provide persuasive circumstantial evidence of the media's agenda-setting influence. For if the heightened public awareness of the issue in March 1990 was exclusively the product of the punitively high poll tax levels set at that time, one would have expected public concern to be sustained over the following months — the period when initial payments were due and the controversial process of enforcement had begun. As it was, at the very moment people had to begin paying the tax, public concern began to fade in a similar manner to the media's.

A Rogue By Any Other Name? The Media and the 'So-called' Community Charge
Following the recent example of several Cabinet Ministers, we are now permitted to refer to the new impost as the 'poll tax'. However, until late 1990 the issue of what this new local levy should be called had proved a highly contentious issue. Although universal per capita taxes have a long history of being referred to
FIGURE 2
'Most Important Issues' (October 1988–June 1990)

Source: MORI/The Times 2 July 1990.
as ‘Poll Taxes’ (and, indeed, were so-labelled in the previous government review of local government finance options in 1983), the government invested a lot of time and effort in promoting a new name for their system: the ‘Community Charge’. Apart from an understandable wish to disassociate the reforms from certain negative historical associations (not least the fourteenth-century peasant revolts), there were clear ideological reasons for their attempt to recast the new system as a ‘Charge’ on the ‘Community’, rather than a ‘tax’ on the electorate (‘poll’). The essence and importance of this semantic dispute was summed up in a *Times* editorial in 1987:

> The poll tax is a bad tax. It takes no account of people’s ability to pay and it may be widely defied. If it were really a tax, its enemies would be right to kill it; but it is not. It is a charge. It may be a bad tax but it is not a bad charge. This is not playing with words. The difference between a tax and a charge is crucial. ... Once the community charge is seen as a charge for services, rather than a tax on income, then it becomes justified. (*The Times*, 19 Dec. 1987:20).

However, close analysis of the coverage reveals this new title found little favour among journalists. Only 16 percent of those news items with the reforms as their main topic used the term ‘Community Charge’ in either their introduction or headline, compared with 53 percent who referred to the ‘Poll Tax’. The extent of the government’s failure to promote the new name is further underlined by the finding that only 42 percent of all items used the term ‘Community Charge’ anywhere in their content.

The media’s resistance to the government’s label probably reflected several factors. The comparative unwieldiness of the term ‘Community Charge’ would have been a major reason for its exclusion from so many newspaper headlines (‘Poll Tax’ fits far more readily into a headline). But its infrequent usage in general content suggests that resistance to the term extended beyond concerns about copy constraints.

The term ‘poll tax’ has always had the wider public currency (a point conceded in the the ‘Step by Step Guide’) and this would partially account for journalists’ preference for it. However, given that our media sample was taken over four years after the ‘Community Charge’ first entered the nation’s political vocabulary, one cannot also avoid the conclusion that the media’s persistence in referring to the ‘poll tax’ indicated a particular value position on
the reforms: that the new levy should be seen as a tax not a 'charge', and that its fairness should be assessed in relation to ability to pay.

Whatever the reasons for their intractability over this matter, we have here a conspicuous failure by the government to control media definitions in the way that they would have liked. When we consider the presentation of key individuals and institutions and poll tax related 'themes' in the media coverage, the symbolism of this failure becomes even more apposite.

Poll Tax Actors: Who Was Featured and in What Frame of Mind?

When coding the individuals and institutions who were active subjects in the poll tax coverage, we also noted their status (i.e. main actor or secondary actor) and their critical disposition towards the reforms (i.e. 'critical', 'supportive', 'neutral' or 'unstated'). The critical stance of each actor was exclusively determined by the views she or he expressed in the item. Therefore, for example, although Margaret Thatcher was a strident advocate of the reforms, she would only have been coded as 'supportive' if she clearly articulated positive opinions in the article.

As we see in Table 1, 63 percent of all the actors coded in the local and national press and broadcast coverage were party political figures (i.e. local and national politicians or political party activists), and they were the main actors in 59 percent of items (n.b. only one main actor was coded for each item).

Conservative politicians were featured far more frequently than their party political opponents and were most frequently main actors. Superficially, this greater prominence could be interpreted as a conspicuous success for the government's promotional efforts. However, analysis of the critical dispositions of these party political figures contradicts such an assessment. Only 15 percent of Conservative actors were portrayed as active supporters of the reforms, whereas 14 percent were featured criticizing the new system, and 71 percent displayed no value position. This fragmentation and defensiveness in Conservative ranks contrasted dramatically with the critical consensus presented by the Opposition parties. Not a single Opposition politician was reported making supportive comments about any aspect of the reforms, whereas a clear majority of those featured explicitly articulated their opposition.
When set alongside the views of non party-political actors, the critical consensus against the reforms becomes even more emphatic. An overwhelming percentage of these actors were displayed as either neutral or critical of the Community Charge. And despite their evident marginalization in media coverage, their conspicuous lack of enthusiasm produces a cumulative impression of the Community Charge as a controversial policy initiative with a considerable and vocal range of enemies, and few friends willing (or able) to speak up in its defence. Even the staunchest advocates of the new system found it difficult to find a platform for their views in the media. For example, although the then Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher received nearly twice as much
<table>
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<th>Themes of Coverage</th>
<th>Local Media Main (percent)</th>
<th>Local Media Secondary (percent)</th>
<th>National Media Main (percent)</th>
<th>National Media Secondary (percent)</th>
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4. Effects

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<td>Other</td>
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Note: Percentages = frequency of appearance of theme/aggregate of themes in coverage. Secondary themes in the Guardian, The Times and Sunday Times coverage are not included in this table.
coverage as the Labour leader, she was only reported making supportive comments in less than a quarter of her appearances.

_Community Charge Themes: The Interpretative and Evaluative Dimensions of Poll Tax News_

In lay terms the critique of political information is about bias, persuasion, or even evasion. Always the problem is to convey the adequacy or otherwise of the account calibrated against some 'extra-media' reality — itself the most exasperating and elusive of constructs. The concern, implicitly if not explicitly, is to ascertain one particular vector of the content: evaluation. This is, however, but one dimension. There is another vector in the content, namely the 'interpretative' dimension. The _evaluative_ dimension addresses the question of whether the media account is pro or anti the policy issue being described. The _interpretative_ dimension asks what aspects of the policy are broadcast into the public domain? In other words, what is the issue seen to be about? In this section we shall seek to draw some conclusions about the evaluative and interpretative aspects of the coverage of the Community Charge in the media.

The theme categories for this section of the content analysis were organized under five headings:

1. themes related to the origins of the reforms (e.g. problems with the rating system, the wider economic objectives of the government, and previous reforms of local government finance);
2. themes related to the implementation of the reforms (e.g. the progress of the Finance Bill, central government/parliamentary decision making, local government administration etc.);
3. themes related to the political responses to the reforms by various individuals and institutions (e.g. party political responses, other public and private sector responses);
4. themes related to the effects of the reforms (e.g. redistributive effects, political effects and other economic effects etc.);
5. other themes (e.g. explanations about how the system works, analysis of alternatives to the Community Charge).

One main theme and up to three subsidiary themes were coded for each poll tax related item.

Looking first at the coverage of the likely or actual effects of the reforms, we can note two discernible patterns (see Table 2).
Firstly, the effects of the Community Charge were almost exclusively defined as contradicting the government's interests: in electoral terms, eroding their support; in economic terms, harming the immediate prospects of businesses and the 'economy; and in redistributional terms, unfairly shifting the taxation burden from Duke to Dustman.

Secondly, the coverage focused on predictable, short term effects (e.g. electoral prospects, individual liability, inflation, and other immediate and tangible economic effects), and cumulatively neglected many important questions related to the longer term impact of the reforms. For example, the significant increase in central control of local government revenue produced by the new system was very rarely mentioned, and there was no examination of what the reforms would mean for the power relationship between the local and central state in Britain. Similarly, important civil liberties issues raised by the enforcement of the new tax — such as the threats to personal privacy, disenfranchisement and abuses of the judicial process — received scant media attention.

This negative and constrained interpretation of the effects of the Community Charge was mirrored in other thematic groupings. When presenting political responses to the Community Charge, the media predominantly focused on the negative reactions of the general public and the rank and file of the Conservative Party, and neglected the important contributions of other non party-political individuals and institutions. Similarly, the presentation of local government administration of the new system principally centred on the unacceptably high poll tax levels set by local authorities and the problems of collection, rather than questions about registration, enforcement and data protection.

Most damagingly for the government, the media were conspicuously uninterested in presenting the historical rationale behind the introduction of the Community Charge, being overwhelmingly concerned with the shortcomings of the new system rather than the 'evils' of its predecessor.

When comparing the themes of local and national coverage, some interesting disparities emerge. The local media revealed a markedly greater interest in the effects of the reforms and questions related to the administration of the system. In this regard, they can be said to have produced a more grounded and substantial analysis of the Community Charge than their national counterparts, who were more concerned with their familiar
territories of parliamentary process and party-political reactions. The local media also focused greater attention on the inequities of the Community Charge (such as its failure to take account of ability to pay, the inadequacy of the rebate system and the unfairness of the safety-net system).

So what general points can we draw from this analysis of the themes in Community Charge coverage, and the divergences in local and national press agendas? And in particular, what does this tell us about the nature of the government's failure to promote the poll tax through the media?

Firstly, the failure of the government's agenda building was at an evaluative rather than interpretative level. Certainly, there was no fundamental challenge by the media to the ideological parameters of the government's case for reforming local government finance. As we have already noted, many alternative agendas which have preoccupied campaigners concerned about the poll tax have gone virtually unreported. If the government's ideological offensive floundered under media scrutiny, as it manifestly did, it did so on its own terms.

Secondly, although the appreciable disparities between local and national media coverage provide a valuable corrective to those who assume local press agendas are but pale imitations of those found at national level, the framework of local coverage, despite its independent posture, was still contained by the structure of national debate. That is to say, it was evaluatively autonomous but interpretatively dependent.

Summary and Conclusions

The public have not been persuaded that the Community Charge is fair.
(Michael Heseltine, Secretary of State for the Environment, 21 March 1991)

In this paper we have traced the progress and failure of a concerted campaign by the British government to promote a major policy innovation. Most recent debates about the demise of the Community Charge have focused on its failure at a policy level: on the administrative problems it created, its exorbitant cost and manifest inequities. It is not our intention here to contribute to these appraisals but rather to emphasize a point that has been neglected in these political post-mortems. That is, that the failure
of the Community Charge as a policy was inextricably linked to its ideological failure. Despite enthusiastic and expensive promotion, this major fiscal reform never secured a popular mandate. Indeed it was the consistency and intensity of public opposition that forced its eventual repeal. If we want to understand why the Community Charge failed at a policy level, we need to examine the process by which its public credibility was so emphatically eroded. In particular, why the wrath of the electorate over high poll tax bills was directed so unerringly at the government, rather than at the supposedly ‘profligate’ local authorities who set these levels (which was what the government initially believed would happen).

As we have seen, the media played a key role in informing and framing public debate about the poll tax. The British electorate were mainly dependent upon the media for information about the reforms, and public opinion seems to have been more closely linked to the range and intensity of media coverage than to the policy process itself. Clearly, the negativity and hostility of media coverage, and the failure of the government to dictate the terms of the media’s evaluative agenda, were major factors in the destruction of the system’s public credibility. However, this begs a range of important questions. Why were the British media—collectively not renowned for their rabid anti-Conservatism—so critical of the reforms? And what does this reveal about the conditions and limitations of state agenda-building? We shall know more detail about these issues once our research is completed but our preliminary analysis does suggest a couple of reasons for the government’s difficulties.

Firstly, the major disagreements within Conservative ranks about the Charge appears to have fundamentally undermined the tenability of the government’s arguments. Not only did the media see these internal wranglings as newsworthy events in themselves, the fact that many of the most vocal critics of the poll tax were from the Conservative Party prevented the media from organizing their analysis along conventional party-political lines. Moreover, the lack of a clear and consistent supportive consensus on which to draw meant they were far more receptive to oppositional voices.

Secondly, there was a considerable political and public relations counter-response from the local state over the introduction of the poll tax. Two years before the introduction of the new system in England and Wales, it was noted that the political restrictions governing publicity produced by local authorities
should not really inhibit the conduct of any campaign about the poll tax. It may require the adoption of a different style to that which an authority may otherwise prefer. But where, as here, the facts themselves are so damning, it should be easy to devise lawful, but effective, publicity. (Willmore, 1988:126)

Given the close working relationship between councils and the local media, and the growing dependence of the latter on local authority press releases (Franklin, 1986); it would seem the local state had a very considerable influence on the frame and reference of media debate, particularly with local media.

The twin trends we identified in the introduction to this article of media conglomeration and state centralization, create the conditions for an unprecedented concentration of power over political communications. The implications for the diversity of debate in a democratic system are clear, and permeate well beyond narrow research questions about the nature of agenda setting. In this article we have presented preliminary evidence about the conditions under which a forthright communications offensive in such conditions can fail. This should not lead to sanguine and premature dismissal of the serious questions raised by the current state of the political communications apparatus in countries like the UK. But as the urgent task of investigating and explaining the relation between information and democracy in rapidly changing capitalist states gets underway, further careful examination of this kind into the limits and checks on centralizing tendencies will become both an academic necessity and a political duty.

Notes
This article is a revision of a paper presented to the Political Studies Association annual conference, Lancaster University, April, 1991. It draws on research funded by the Economic and Social Research Council.

1. We are grateful to Bob Franklin for drawing our attention to this article.
2. The local areas selected were: Easington (County Durham), Liverpool, Bradford, Guildford (Surrey), Oxford, and Huntingdonshire (Cambridgeshire).
3. C4's 7pm news, BBC1's 9 O'Clock News, ITN's News at Ten, BBC2's Newsnight, BBC1 and ITV's weekend evening news bulletins, BBC Radio 1's News '90, and BBC Radio 4's 6 o'clock news and The World Tonight.

References
Franklin, B. (1986) 'Public Relations, the Local Press and the Coverage of Local Government', Local Government Studies, 4 (July/August).


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Chapter 6

Journalists and the Poll Tax

In preceding chapters we have shown how centrally the media featured in the campaign strategies of the main protagonists in the poll tax debate, and how different media reported the issue. No doubt, to the perceptive reader, parallels are already evident between the two discussions. However, to fully understand the origins of media discourses on the Community Charge, we must also address the views and activities of the key intermediaries in the news production process—the journalists and editors who commissioned and authored these accounts. For news is far more than the sum of opinions and information received by news organizations. News professionals necessarily exercise value judgements in selecting and filtering the information they receive and in directing their news gathering. As such they are active participants in the encoding process, who have a 'licensed autonomy' (Curran, 1990) and a 'discretionary power' (Semetko et al., 1991) to reframe and reinterpret the information they process and the occurrences they witness.

In this chapter we focus on three main themes: the different structural relationship of news organizations to political arenas; journalists' estimations of source credibility; and their awareness of their audience and public sensibilities more generally. Unless otherwise stated, all quotations in this chapter are based on interviews with the authors.

News organizations and news sources

Herbert Gans has likened the relationship between journalists and their sources to 'a dance, for sources seek access to journalists, and journalists seek access to sources. Although it takes two to tango, either sources or journalists can lead, but more often than not, sources do the leading'.

* See the appendix on methods for more details about these interviews.
Taxation and Representation: The Media, Political Communication and the Poll Tax

(Gans, 1979: 116). Our research suggests this metaphor requires further elaboration. For, although the dance steps may be well defined and broadly rehearsed, not all journalists pursue (or are pursued by) the same partners, and not all news organizations can afford (or want) to enter the same ballroom.

The journalist interviews corroborated the content analysis findings: that different types of news organizations and journalists produced their accounts of the poll tax in very distinct political environments. The most fundamental difference was between national and local media. Colin Seymour-Ure (1987) suggests there exists a hierarchy of 'political leadership arenas' in terms of national news media coverage. At its apex are the Government and the parliamentary opposition, who are guaranteed media attention and coverage, and near its base are regional leaders and authorities, whose media presence is more uncertain and intermittent. Although presented as a 'notional ranking', this typology neatly captures the legislature orientated nature of national reporting of the Community Charge.

However, this ranking needs to be completely inverted to describe the principal leadership arenas for the local media. Local government towers over the newsbeats of local journalism, rather than being confined to the peripheries. Similarly, local voluntary agencies, pressure groups and constituency MPs have a far greater news value, whereas national political arenas have a relegated salience. In interviews, local news professionals repeatedly stressed how their news selection was driven by the test of local applicability:

'I would not be happy to run something that was blatantly national and in no way impinged upon the lives of people around here. Even if it was an issue which was national and would have an impact, I would want to say "Well what's the special impact around here?" And that test is always applied' (Local radio news editor).

'The only time we would go to national figures, would be if they happened to be here, visiting, or if they also happened to be local people' (Political editor, regional TV).

* This principle has long applied in the local media. For example, research undertaken by one of the authors in 1970 into the local press identified the carrying of local information as one of the defining functions of local papers (Golding, 1970).
Chapter 6: Journalists and the Poll Tax

The distinctive structural orientation of the local and national media in their news gathering reveals their different audience, prestige and advertising goals (Tunstall, 1971). In Britain, the local and national media are to some extent parallel systems; addressing and informing the same audiences but in different ways. Just as the credibility and revenue base of all national media is tied up in their ability to articulate and address national concerns, so local media depend upon local specificity to ensure their distinctiveness from national media, and thereby secure a share of the advertising and circulation market.

However, in acknowledging the distinctive orientation of the national and local media, it is also important to recognize there was a degree of exchange between media sectors on this issue. News organizations always keep a weather eye on other media when reporting events,1 and this practice was clearly evident in the reporting of the Community Charge. Inevitably, newsrooms paid greatest attention to the output of their closest competitors, but editorial surveillance also extended to other forms of news media. However, whereas the national media only consistently surveyed national outlets, local media perused both immediate and national media sources. In this way local media were far more conscious of national media agendas than vice versa, where the national media relied on an idiosyncratic and uneven feedback provided by 'stringers' and local news agencies.

Another linking mechanism was the information distributed to local and national newsrooms via on-line news agencies. In reporting the poll tax, journalists from all media identified the Press Association (PA) as being a particularly important source of information in their reporting of the poll tax — both for editorial copy and as a lead for further news gathering. Indeed, for many local newspapers with no parliamentary or London staff, the Press Association was the sole source of immediate information about the legislature:

'[Chris] Moncreiff's [political editor of the Press Association] views on it — his interpretation and authoritative views — would be carried in stacks and stacks of evening papers, almost as holy writ, although not under his by-line' (News editor, regional newspaper).

* A MORI survey of newspaper editors found that 86 per cent cited 'articles in other newspapers' as one of the 'most useful sources of information' to their work as editors, compared with only 22 per cent who cited news releases (Guardian, 7/1/91).
Most news organizations had also invested in on-line networking, which pooled information from both internal and external sources. For example, all regional BBC newsrooms were networked to a computerized message switching system which gave editors and journalists access into all the external on-line information that the BBC received centrally. Through key word searches, news editors could swiftly monitor all the current agency information on a chosen topic. Regional BBC news editors also regularly received information and guidance from the organization’s own Parliamentary Research Unit:

“They’ve got everything on file in one form or another, a lot of it computerized. Now we can’t call it up directly, which is probably just as well, because the complexity of that is so great that we might call up the wrong things … If we can’t get them on the phone, we get them within ten or fifteen minutes on a fax machine’ (BBC regional TV political editor).

By recognizing, on the one hand, the habitual and essential distinctiveness of local newsgathering and presentation from national reporting and, on the other, the linking mechanisms that bound the media sectors, we can explain why local media coverage was evaluatively distinct from national coverage, but interpretatively dependent. The daily exposure of local news professionals to the national news agenda inevitably influenced the kinds of issues they addressed. However, in the process of ‘localizing’ the issue, these journalists approached a different range of sources with their own particular views and opinions about the tax. These provided the foundations to the local media’s distinctive evaluation of the policy.

Specialist correspondents and news sources

The journalist interviews also exposed how the reporting of different types of journalists was framed by distinctive political environments. This was most apparent in the reporting of specialist correspondents in the national media.

By assigning a specialist correspondent to either a subject area or a physical location, a news organization is not so much casting a news net (Tuchman, 1978), as nailing it to the quay. The investment in a specialist post both reveals a news organization’s perception of the salience of a subject
area (Golding and Elliott, 1978), and ensures its continuing news value — as the prestige correspondents file ‘expert’ (and expensive) accounts, that by dint of their authorship, command editorial priority (Tunstall, op. cit.). The reporting of the Community Charge at national level was dominated by two types of specialist newsgatherers: local government correspondents and political specialists (such as political correspondents, chief political correspondents and political editors).

Local government correspondents

I'm always conscious that every time local government comes to the fore, how little we really know about it and the way it works. And that we tend to have to start again from square one. Now that will be addressed ... because in two weeks time we will be appointing a local government correspondent. Knee-jerking when our people appear lobbing bricks through windows is not actually covering local government. It's covering news stories in the time-honoured fashion' (BBC regional TV news editor).

Although several newspapers had had designated local government correspondents for many years, their increasing proliferation in the national media during the late 1980s, was closely linked to the political furore over the Community Charge. For example, before 1988, local government issues were covered nationally at the BBC by their environment correspondents (mirroring the remit of the Department of the Environment). However, as local government and environmental issues separately, and coincidentally, rose up the political agenda, it was decided that the post should be split. Furthermore, as these were the days before the advent of bimedia at the BBC (where radio and TV news gathering have been merged), separate local government correspondent posts were established for both television and radio.

By 1991, under a national BBC initiative entitled 'the enhancement of regional broadcasting', local government correspondents were also being established in regional BBC newsrooms. The preponderance of bids for local specialists under this scheme reflected both the continued newsworthiness of local government, and a recognition that the poll tax debate had exposed deficiencies in their news gathering. As one regional news editor admitted:
"There was a certain feeling at a network level that the poll tax story sort of crept up on them. And I think that, in part, the arrival of the local government correspondent can be attributed to that sense that the BBC hadn't got its ear quite so closely to the ground as it might have ... It's also a recognition that local government finance is perceived as being, continuing to be, an important and complex story."

The emergence of the local government specialist during this period was also evident in the national broadsheet press. Although several newspapers had had designated local government correspondents well before the advent of the Community Charge, the political furore over its implementation saw greater emphasis placed on the post. For example, one local government specialist working for a national broadsheet noted that before his appointment in 1989 there had been 'a very erratic level of coverage' of local government, due to the varying status of the local government correspondent. The previous correspondent had been employed on 'a part time specialist basis and for a short period. And then before that there was a period when we had nobody at all covering local government'.

Of course, not all news media had, or sought to acquire, specialist local government correspondents during this period. For example, both Channel 4 and ITV news had no such correspondents during the most intensive stages of the political debate, in early 1990. In this instance their absence reflected the historical (and increasing) financial pressures on independent television news and current affairs and their continued commitment to generalist news gathering, in spite of the Birtian revolution at the BBC, which saw journalistic specialism as playing a vital role in rectifying an endemic 'bias against understanding' in television news (McNair, 1994).

If the partial proliferation and investment in local government specialists during the implementation of the tax reflected a perception in many news organizations of the need for greater 'in-house' expertise in this area, all the specialist correspondents interviewed had acquired their expertise 'on the job', rather than through previous experience in local government matters. For example, one of the most influential local government specialists at the height of the political debate had been a political correspondent prior to the 1987 General Election, and his appointment to the post was directly motivated by his judgement that the poll tax 'was going to become a huge issue ... One of the reasons I took the job was that I knew ... it was going to
Chapter 6: Journalists and the Poll Tax

be probably the best domestic story of this parliament, and it’s turned out to be that’. This pattern is consistent with previous research on specialist correspondents (Tunstall, op. cit.; Morrison and Tumber, 1985; Negrine, 1993; Seymour-Ure, 1977).

Not surprisingly, to generate specialized knowledge, these correspondents developed specialized newsbeats. As local government correspondents in the national media were excluded from the parliamentary lobby, their governmental contacts mainly focused on its executive branches at the Department of the Environment. Beyond Whitehall, their main regular sources included politicians and officers of the national local authority associations, local authority research units, a small number of local government academics, specialist pressure groups and national voluntary organizations. Interestingly, despite their designation, their direct contact with local authorities was infrequent, and tended to be facilitated via the national offices of the various local authority associations. Certainly, whilst their newsbeat was far broader than those of the political specialists at Westminster, it still centred around the capital.

As a result of their distinctive information network, these local specialists both anticipated the likely salience of the poll tax issue earlier than other reporters, and sustained their interest in the issue for far longer. Furthermore, they revealed a broader perception of the issues surrounding the implementation of the Community Charge, and were more sensitive to its attendant technicalities. As one specialist explained:

‘It’s very difficult. Transitional relief I’ll try to explain as a system whereby the Government protected people who were going from a very low rates bill or a comparatively low rates bill to a very high household poll tax. But SSAs! I mean, transitional relief was easier than SSAs. SSAs – people just glaze over at the very mention of them and you cannot get editors interested in them. I mean, even now, I was on the phone talking about “this is the great unwritten story about the poll tax system” ... The fact is that the Government, civil servants living in Whitehall, make up a formula about what they think councils need to spend, and in most cases it relates to nothing near their view of what they need to spend ... Rebates as well are quite difficult to put across on television, because, you know, rebates in principal sound simple enough, but when you actually look at how they work, it can get very complex.’
These journalists also had a greater awareness of the historical context to the introduction of the new tax, more readily linking it to earlier attempted and actual reforms of the local financial system:

'Six months ago I actually met the man who wrote the 1981 Green Paper... And it had two interesting appendices. One was an appendix on why the poll tax wouldn't work alone... and the second one was an appendix on financing the education service centrally which, both of which became absolutely key in debates later on. So I mean, so I had quite a large background in local government and perhaps was unusual in terms of thinking "oh this is an important issue" as opposed to simply on the basis of "how is this going to affect my readers?" full stop. "Well we don't know so what's the point in writing about it at the moment?"' (Local government correspondent).

Political specialists: ‘The big issues, local government wise’

'Good Lord! I don’t really get involved in local government, particularly. I mean, not terribly much. I do the big issues, local government wise... My function around here is to report what the government of the day does, what the opposition say, and that sort of thing' (Political editor, national newspaper).

If the increase of local government correspondents in the 1980s reflected contemporaneous domestic political developments, the lengthy history of specialist political correspondent posts reveals the perennial fascination of the British mass media with the legislature. Due to Britain's highly centralized political system, political correspondents are first and foremost parliamentary correspondents. (This principle generally applies even where local media have their own specialist designated political correspondent, or where a political correspondent is 'pooled' amongst a collective group on local newspapers.)

The first political correspondents were gallery reporters, who observed and recorded parliamentary debates and governmental decision-making. However, over time, interest increased in generating a 'behind the scenes' understanding of parliamentary processes and decision-making that could only be provided by journalists having more direct and informal access to
Chapter 6: Journalists and the Poll Tax

politicians (Tunstall, 1970; 1971). Nowadays, the most prestigious political correspondents are the lobby correspondents, who are:


Membership of the Lobby is highly restricted, and these select correspondents receive daily briefings from senior governmental and parliamentary sources, have privileged access to senior Government figures as well as physical access to the parliamentary lobby. Although not all political specialists are members of the Lobby, our discussion focuses mainly on the experiences of lobby correspondents in reporting the Community Charge, because of their élite status among political specialists.

Lobby correspondents’ reporting of the Community Charge was informed by a very different range of sources from those used by local government correspondents. Their privileged but cloistered existence meant they were principally dependent on governmental and party political sources in reporting the tax, and had only occasional contact with other external news sources, such as the local authority associations. The narrowness of their poll tax newsbeat was not exceptional, but rather indicative of the traditional parochialism of the parliamentary specialists (Tunstall, 1970). When their contacts were broadened, it was generally because a non-parliamentary political source had brought their argument to Parliament, often with the support of an MP:

‘[The Anti Poll Tax Federation] had good solid links with Dave Nellist and a couple of Merseyside MPs and Scot MPs, so they got the opportunity of getting in ... People like [Steve] Nally and Tommy Sheridan came in and gave press conferences in the House to us, to the likes of us’ (Political correspondent).

One particularly important element in their reporting was their opportunity to draw on covert, off the record briefings to inform their political analyses. Not surprisingly, other specialists were very envious of the privileged access lobby correspondents had to the legislature, recognizing that it provided a unique insight into the evolving political debate:
'There are differences between my position and the more privileged position of a lobby correspondent or a political correspondent, who is actually in the lobby, has access to the parties at closer hand, who can get off the record stuff. I miss that. I mean, I feel I ought to have that in a sense, because I'm missing out. I have to go off the back of something coming from the lobby, rather than getting it myself. But that's just the way the system works' (Local government correspondent).

As explained in Chapter 3, the lobby briefings were only rarely used to ease the introduction of the tax; and when they were it was mainly to smear back bench critics. However, during the policy's introductory and evaluative periods, these briefings assumed a crucial role, by allowing ministers to 'road test' various reform options for their broader political acceptability.

The main significance of the 'behind the scenes' access of lobby correspondents prior to the tax's introduction in England and Wales was in sensitising news organizations to the extent of dissent within Conservative ranks. Many back bench Conservative MPs only 'went public' with their criticisms once the political crisis had escalated out of the Government's control. However, they had been privately communicating their concerns to these journalists for a considerably longer period. Even more crucially, it was the lobby correspondents who were privy to the deep reservations of several cabinet ministers about the fairness and feasibility of the tax, that quickly became the received wisdom in the national media.

This narrow but privileged news gathering had a direct effect on their reporting of the tax. Firstly, they experienced greater difficulties in dealing with the more arcane aspects of local finance. Indeed, several of the most prominent parliamentary figures involved in the debate were highly critical of how misinformed several senior political correspondents were about some of its most crucial aspects:

'Local government finance is a minefield. It's such a technical area that many people shy away ... I understand that. But the media obviously take that view as well. We've had great difficulties with people like [National TV Political Correspondent] who simply cannot understand anything to do with local government finance ... Because if you've got to spend an hour every time explaining the most minute point to a journalist, you actually lose the ability to respond quickly, to get across
a wider message, and that has been a genuine problem’ (Opposition local government spokesperson, interview with authors).

‘One could never persuade them to explain the problems of the uncollectability, for example. They didn’t think that was important. Unfairness? They could get a hold of that’ (Conservative MP, interview with authors).

Second, because of this disregard for the technicalities of the topic, political correspondents saw the issue as far less problematic and complex to report than the local government specialists. As one political editor put it:

‘The thing about Mrs Thatcher, she did explain things, extremely succinctly. She could actually say the poll tax is about making sure that everyone who can pays towards the services that they use. That was how she would sell it. Which is a fairly simple concept. And Labour’s concept, the opposition’s concept was very much it is unfair and is unworkable. So once you’ve got those twin sort of concepts it’s actually quite straightforward.’

Of all the journalists, political correspondents were most fixated with the process rather than the substance of the (party) political debate about local finance. One implication of this, was that their attention to the issue was far more transient than the local government specialists. They discovered the issue far later in its legislative timetable, and became bored with it far sooner, once the Conservative leadership issue had been resolved, and the Tory rebellions assuaged.

Finally, the perceptions and newsgathering activities of these elite correspondents exerted a powerful influence over the general orientation of their news organizations towards the issue. The fact that all national media had specialist political correspondents, even if they had few other designations, reveals the higher status of this specialist field compared with others (Tunstall, 1970). And whereas several local government correspondents complained about the dissonance between their interest in the tax and the general news agenda of their organizations—particularly during early and later stages of the policy cycle—political correspondents experienced no equivalent frustrations. Indeed, to a large extent, it was their reading of the political salience of the issue that determined the broader newsroom
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agenda. In other words, the political specialists set the interpretative framework within which local government correspondents had to work.

Reporting Implications

It is important to consider whether the manifest differences between specialists in their newsgathering on this issue had any impact on their reporting. As Negrine notes, one of the most neglected aspects in a dearth of research into journalistic specialization is 'the relationship between the designation and the end product' (1993: 3).

Table 6.1. Actors featured in specialist correspondent authorized items in national TV & radio news (1 March – 5 May 1990)

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Political specialists</th>
<th>Local government specialists</th>
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<tr>
<td>Parliamentary/government actors</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Councillors</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>63</td>
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<td>Local government officers</td>
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<td>4</td>
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<td>Local government associations/pressure groups</td>
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<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opinion pollsters and other research</td>
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<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business and business federations</td>
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<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Anti poll tax groups</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other voluntary sector groups</td>
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<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Unions</td>
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<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General public</td>
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<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (e.g. other professionals, journalists)</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of items</td>
<td>(153)</td>
<td>(48)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figures relate to news and feature items (poll tax related and focused). Percentages = the percentage of items authored which feature at least one actor under each category. The percentages are separate and do not add up to 100.

Our study revealed clear differences in how specialist correspondents reported the poll tax, particularly in television news reporting. Reflecting the distinctive news gathering of both specialisms, news stories by political specialists reported a narrower range of political views than local government correspondents, mainly focusing on parliamentary actors (see Table 6.1). By doing so, they also emphasized different themes in their reporting (see Table 6.2). Whereas local government correspondents spent more time reporting aspects of central government decision-making and local implementation of the reforms, political correspondents were more inter-
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...ested in recording party political responses to the policy. Furthermore, although both types of correspondents revealed a similar degree of interest in the effects of the policy, for the political specialists these were almost exclusively construed in electoral terms, whereas local government correspondents presented them in broader terms (e.g. 'winners and losers' and service provision).

Table 6.2. Themes in specialist correspondent coverage on TV and radio news (1 March – 5 May 1990)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes related to:</th>
<th>Political specialists</th>
<th>Local government specialists</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>%</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Origins</td>
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<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government/parliament decision-making</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local government implementation</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responses</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effects</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alternatives to tax/explanations</td>
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<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of themes coded</td>
<td>361</td>
<td>141</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figures relate to news and feature items in polltax Items [related and focused]. Up to four themes could be coded for each item. Percentages = frequency of appearance/aggregate of themes coded (all figures are rounded).

Perceptions of news source credibility

If journalist contact with news sources differed locally and nationally, and between particular types of correspondents, how did journalists generally view the performance and credibility of the main protagonists in the political debate? As Tuchman (1978) observes, the perceived credibility of a news source is a crucial factor in their inclusion and treatment in news. This section is divided into two, and begins by looking at journalistic perceptions of the credibility of key ‘advocates’ in the debate. It then identifies who journalists elected as the ‘arbiters’ of this policy debate.

Advocates

As we outlined in Chapter 1, ‘advocates’ are those news sources who are recognized by the news media as having an overt interest in a political process and outcome. As a controversial policy with far reaching ramifications, the Community Charge excited a diverse range of opinions from a considerable variety of political sources. However, our content analysis has shown that the main protagonists in media coverage were the two
main political parties (whether nationally or locally). In this section we open this point up a little further, by looking at how journalists assessed the performance of these key advocates in the political debate, and what factors were seen to have increased or undermined their salience or credibility. Because of the strong links between ‘maverick’ Labour activists and external campaign groups, we also compare journalistic perceptions of the credibility and significance of the anti poll tax movement.

**Government sources**

When asked to assess the Conservative Party’s performance in promoting the poll tax, journalists almost exclusively referred to governmental actions, rather than those of Conservative Central Office. This mirrored the preferred promotional strategy of the Conservative leadership, who only latently utilized their party political resources, when the issue had become politically unavoidable.

On a practical level, journalists and editors were deeply unimpressed with what they perceived as the ineptitude of the Government’s publicity work. In part this reflected a longstanding cynicism about the efficiency of the Government’s information services, which the complexities and controversies over the Community Charge only served to highlight. Particularly frustrating for the journalists was their inability to gain direct access to civil servants in their information seeking. As one local government correspondent complained:

"Throughout the entire period I actually felt I knew a lot more about what was going on in the Department of the Environment than the press office did. I know that sounds boastful, but I mean it was the fact for most of the time ... The press office were only as good as the time that the local government finance division [at the DoE] were prepared to answer queries from the press office ... I think their patience especially, basically went – dried up – and the relationship between the DoE press office and local government officials was gradually disintegrating."

Local journalists were particularly critical of the information dissemination from the regional government offices. On the one hand, this was because they failed to release information with sufficient speed, and on the
other because they were unable to provide access to senior politicians 'on the stump' in their area:

'[Information] comes a day late from regional office. Why do they bother censoring it? If it is important we've had it faxed directly from the Department concerned. The regional office get this great wodge of paper in and send it out again the next day, a day late, so it's been in all the nationals that morning, or it's been on the Today programme that morning. I'm not about to carry something the following morning that's gone everywhere. Complete waste of time. And they're also no good at getting access to ministers. Theoretically you actually go to them and say "please, you know, so and so's up here tomorrow, can we have an interview with him?" You know you can do that but nobody pays you too much notice. It's better to deal with the Department directly' (Local radio news editor).

However, there were also specific elements of the Government's promotion of the tax that created a deep and abidingly negative impression in the media. Initially this related to the jarring contrast between the pretensions and slickness of the DoE public relations campaigns and the unconstructed profile of the sponsoring minister:

'Nick Ridley famously had no concept of presentational skills whatsoever ... So I mean you had the two sides to it. On the one hand, you have this immense marketing operation ... who were trying to sell the Community Charge. On the other hand, you had a Secretary of State who had absolutely, was, you know, nil point on the question of marketing, and didn't care about it at all' (Local government correspondent).

Beyond this, the political furor over the Government's national publicity offensive in May 1989 offered an important early indication of the political difficulties the tax would encounter. On one level, this was because of its farcical and shambolic aspects:

'When they were distributing the poll tax leaflets ... I was told, perhaps off the record, that they were seriously thinking of sending John Gummer up to a monastery dressed as a monk to make the point that, of
course, monks are exempt from the poll tax. But they never got around to that' (Local government correspondent).

'I suppose the peak of it was when they produced the "You and the Community Charge" leaflets, with the happy smiling toy-town folks on — it was yellow, wasn't it? And they had one black smiling dustman ... I mean it got absurd at some press conferences, where if you asked a question which contained the word "poll tax", you were then delivered a 10 minute lecture on "how dare you use words like poll tax?" Which was, you just kind of felt, this is time wasting' (Political correspondent).

On another level, because of the swift intervention of several opponents of the tax, journalists were very sensitive about the apparent misappropriation of public funds:

'I think that people really did feel that they were using public money to promote Conservative policy. And if there was one single issue which triggered it I would now ... identify that as it. And that was their first mistake I think. I think it could have been handled much more intelligently. Curiously, probably by making better use of the local media — as it removes you, it takes you a step away, so that you're not seen as doing a public promotion of a particular party political policy. That was the first thing they did wrong, wasn't it? Well I think it was a non starter after that. I mean it's like actually having the first eight batsmen knocked out in the first two overs and you're stuffed thereafter' (Local radio news editor).

However, despite the widespread scorn of the Government's public relations efforts, journalists were highly antagonistic to any suggestion that the main cause of the policy's difficulties lay in presentational miscalculations:

'There was that famous time when at a conference, when [Margaret Thatcher] said ... "the Minister has failed to get the message across". I think Michael Howard was sitting beside her at the time. Now that is just sheer, downright patronising' (Political correspondent).

In general, journalists saw these promotional difficulties as symptomatic of the political troubles the Government faced. This was most fundamentally
revealed to the journalists by the way the policy in practice appeared consistently to confound Government predictions. As a tax intended to expose the disparity between Labour profligacy and Conservative parsimony in local government, the fact that several Conservative authorities set poll tax levels well in excess of £400 merely confirmed a growing scepticism in the media that had begun with the repeated revisions upwards of Government projections of likely Community Charge levels:

"The original plan was for £150, which again is about a rates bill isn't it? 300 quid for a couple, you can just about cover that, people could afford that ... And it stepped up and each stage it became £200, £250, then, you know, you thought "Jesus, this is big trouble" ... By the time they had 450 quid, or whatever it was, for Windsor, it was too late, there was no going back" (Political correspondent).

Furthermore, having been told that charge levels should be the sole barometer of the efficiency of a local authority (and being largely uninterested in the broader fiscal context in which charge levels were set) journalists paid little attention to Government rationalizations that high charge levels in Conservative areas were caused by Labour or Liberal Democrat profligacy at county council level, or were a temporary consequence of the safety net arrangements. For many journalists, the high poll tax levels in many Conservative areas drove an empirical stake into the heart of the Government's rhetoric.

Another major factor that seriously compromised the Government's credibility, was its inability to command support from its own party. At local level, the Government's 'top down' promotional strategy meant that the infrequently received Governmental endorsements were drowned out for local journalists by the constant criticisms from the Conservative grass roots. At national level, the haemorrhaging of internal support—first from the left of the Party, and latterly from the right and the senior echelons of the Government—served in a similar way, to portray the Prime Minister in an isolated position, and as being less interested in rational policy making than in ideological zealotry:

"It was politics of the crassest level. And it was absolutely, you know, it was ideology driven ... There's a Government Minister, just outside of cabinet. Been with the Department of the Environment. And he said to
me, you didn’t even raise the subject when she was there. Because he
said you’d just get your head blown off. He said it got to the stage where
you didn’t even raise the question’ (Political correspondent).

For many journalists the vehemence and extent of Conservative Party
dissent on the tax was one of the most consistently newsworthy aspects of
the whole debate. And this perceived significance not only affected how
journalists viewed the Government’s proclamations on the Community
Charge, but also those of their political opponents.

The Labour Party

The juxtaposition of party opinions is one of the key strategies used by
journalists to construct their impartiality and objectivity. Therefore, it was
inevitable that Labour politicians would be perceived as one of the most
prominent sources of dissenting comment on the tax and its effects. How­
ever, as discussed in Chapter 4, the poll tax also split the Labour Party over
how it should be best opposed. Therefore, when describing journalist’s
appraisals of Labour’s credibility, it is important to maintain a distinction
between official and maverick Labour sources.

At the time of the interviews (late 1991 to early 1992), official Labour
sources were generally seen as having far more credibility on local govern­
ment matters than the Conservative leadership. Here again, we have a
measure of the extent of the Thatcher government’s political failure over
the poll tax, for such a situation would have been difficult to foreseen back
in the mid-1980s where Conservative attacks on the ‘loony left’ in local
government were being widely amplified by local and national media.

If the political rehabilitation of Labour’s reputation in this area was largely
linked to the Government’s political difficulties, it was also aided by an
acknowledgement that the Party had played its hand quite efficiently. For
example, several national journalists specifically commended the organ­
ization and effectiveness of Labour’s local government team in Parliament
in raising key issues:

‘Probably the most vociferous campaign against [the Community
Charge] has come from David Blunkett and his office, who have bom­
barded everyone with an almost daily press release on the iniquities of
the poll tax. They’ve been very good … Blunkett has a good research
team. The Liberal Democrats have been, frankly, not that active, at least not to my knowledge. And I'd be getting more stuff from Labour than I have from them' (Local government correspondent).

'In political parties, Labour's local government operation I always found fairly impressive' (Political correspondent).

In the local media, too, Labour activism was seen as having had a powerful influence on the terms of political debate about the issue:

'The Labour party were actually much cannier in their PR because they had a very simple message and they stuck to that utterly, simple message, and kept on banging on about it ad nauseam. Which is that it's an unfair tax. And if you were to identify one Tory message I'd be hard put to say "this was the message". The Labour party, I could tell you that was the message, no question. And I think that if you go out on the street and ask anybody what was their message ... most people in the street would identify that as the single, very clever, one line. Punch! Punch! Punch! So it goes in' (Local radio news editor).

However, journalists also shared the view that Labour hadn't had a difficult hand to play — particularly when their criticisms were supported by critics from within the Government's own party. Furthermore, although journalists perceived Labour Party views as an important component in the reporting of the political debate, in isolation they were seen as being far less newsworthy than Conservative criticisms:

'[The Community Charge] became inextricably linked with the politics of the future leadership — the post-Thatcher leadership of the Conservative Party. So that was an ingredient which complicated it and took it away from being just a local government issue ... It was no longer just a question of Labour banging their heads against another brick wall, which sort of didn't get anywhere, however much they may have won the argument' (Political correspondent).

'I think [Labour] conducted it well, but I think the things that defeated it was the kind of enemy within. The lack of support from within her own party, and doubts among ministers which finally killed it. I mean the Opposition can do as much as they like, but I think they waged a
successful, I would say a broadly successful campaign coupled with the doubts within [Margaret Thatcher's] own party' (Political editor).

As we discuss in the next chapter, the subordinate news value of Labour to Conservative dissent had a profound effect on the conduct and intensity of media coverage.

Although the media were broadly receptive to official Labour Party campaigning, they were highly antagonistic towards those in the Party who supported more radical methods. Maverick sources in the Labour Party who advocated non-payment, were both seen as far less credible and attracted outright hostility from many national and local journalists. As one tabloid political editor asserted:

'Very few people down here have got time for MPs who refuse to obey the law which they as a body created'.

Their credibility in the eyes of the national media was further compromised by their close links with the All British Anti Poll Tax Federation (APTF), which many journalists viewed with considerable suspicion and antagonism.

Anti poll tax organizations

We previously noted that whereas the national media readily subscribed to the view that anti poll tax groups were stalking horses for the extreme left, such conspiracy theories were less evident in local reporting. From our interviews it appeared that the roots of this disparity lay in the different contact each media sector had with the movement.

The anti poll tax movement as a whole was an informal and devolved campaign, in which local groups and unions had a considerable degree of autonomy. As we have seen, attempts to unify groups under one national federation generated controversy within the movement itself. Although the Militant-dominated APTF assumed the national leadership mantle in late 1989, their authority to speak on behalf of the movement as a whole was often questioned by Federation members, who shared broader concerns about the hidden agenda to the activism of the Federation's committee (Burns, 1992).
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Despite their questionable status as the national forum for the anti poll tax movement, the Militant-dominated APTF were the only regular point of contact national journalists had with the broader campaign. Although the stridency and forcefulness of comments by the Federation's two main spokespersons often made for good news copy, all the national journalists we interviewed were highly sceptical about both their political mandate and influence. This was accenuated by the context in which the most influential national correspondents met the Federation spokespersons, at news conferences held within the Houses of Parliament. These brought into sharper relief what correspondents perceived as the inappropriateness and presumption of the APTF 'leaders':

'My view of the Anti Poll Tax Federation was kind of moulded somewhat by sitting here at Westminster ... Where the Anti Poll Tax Federation generally meant press conferences chaired by Dave Nellist, with Tommy Sheridan or other members of Militant, in a small committee room upstairs, claiming to speak on behalf of seven million, eight million, nine million non payers, anti poll tax campaigners' (Political correspondent).

The parliamentary setting of these news conferences both served to decontextualize and accenuate the jarring nature of the Federation's rhetoric of street politics and community activism. As another political correspondent commented:

'I personally was terribly antipathetic towards their position. So I found it very difficult to swallow ... My feelings about them was that they were political charlatans. They weren't in there entirely because they wanted to see the back of the poll tax, they were in there to sort of ferment things ... [Tommy] Sheridan was, I thought, was quite impressive. But [Steve] Nally, I thought, yeah, I wouldn't trust him as far as I could throw me granny (I'll now find out he's your brother or something).'

The antipathy of national journalists towards the APTF was also framed by a deep disapproval of the non payment tactic. As one political editor observed:

'I went to the odd news conference they threw down here, but once it was very patently plain and obvious that they intended to break the law, I think that a lot of people lost interest in it ... And of course it
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means that people who don’t pay, can’t pay, won’t pay — or whatever the slogan was — put a burden on other people who sort of obeyed the law and paid up. So, a lot of people down here — most people — had very little time for the Anti Poll Tax Federation because they made it plainly obvious that they intended to break the law. Simple as that.’

Although local journalists similarly disapproved of non-payment, they had more regular and direct contact with local anti poll tax groups, and were far less sceptical about their representative status. This was mainly because they witnessed the groups’ community based activism first hand, and in its ‘natural’ context — i.e. public meetings and rallies — rather than decontextualized in small parliamentary meeting rooms. In these situations they found the ‘rentamob’ stereotypes less easy to apply. Furthermore, they were more regularly approached by the groups themselves. As one local radio journalist commented:

‘Perhaps if you were sitting in Broadcasting House in London and you saw a poll tax protestor, that would appear to be something threatening and something alien from outside. In Bradford we could see that there were a lot of people who were suffering very real hardship, who literally couldn’t pay under the proposals as they were initially put forward... First of all [the local anti poll tax groups] were co-operative. And secondly, I think it is true to say that it was a genuinely mass movement in this area. You always get the professional protestors... However, the thing that has been different about the poll tax, in my view, is that we’ve gone along to these protest meetings, and yes you’ve had Militant sitting in the corner with their newspapers, but you’ve also had a lot of what I would say are ordinary people — working class in Bradford who have come forward and taken part in the protest. Which has been great from our point of view, because we’ve been able to get some good audio we’ve people who say: “I’ve never been on a picket line in my life, but” or “I’ve never broke the law in my life, I’m now 65, but”. And we have noticed that within the Anti Poll Tax Federation there has been a wide spread of people who I would describe as non-politically active, getting involved in it.’

However, the local media shared with the national media a perception that the salience of the anti poll tax groups was essentially transient — that they were beneficiaries of the political furor over the poll tax rather than instigators of it. And just as they were largely neglected prior to the poll tax
demonstrations of March 1990, so their importance was seen to recede as the media tired of reporting public protests.

**Arbiters: 'The guy that hadn't got a political axe to grind'**

'Does anyone really understand the poll tax? We certainly don't—and we bet most other people are in that dark too. We went to Rita Hale, author of an encyclopaedia on the poll tax, to get a few answers' (Everything you wanted to know about poll tax - But didn't like to ask in case they got your address, *Sun*, 17/4/90: 9).

'There ought to be a way of making the needs assessment understandable to more than just two people in the country: one official in Whitehall, and the blessed Tony Travers of the London School of Economics' (Editorial, *Guardian*, 28/2/92: 20).

In our introductory discussion we identified a specific type of news source whose significant contributions to the framing of media discourse are lost in generalized discussions about the interaction between news gatherers and 'accredited', authoritative sources. These are the 'arbiters' in particular topic areas—professionals who are approached by journalists to evaluate assertions and interpretations made by advocates in a political debate.

The arbiters for local and national reporting of the Community Charge were, once again, very different. The principal arbiters for local journalists were local government finance officers, who, even in those areas where local media and council relations were strained, were trusted by journalists both to explain and to adjudicate on the performance of the new system:

'There was a wizzy guy, whose name totally escapes me, in Cambridge City Council. Who was actually an officer rather than a politician ... I can't remember his name for the life of me. But he was absolutely stunning at interpreting for us. He was the guy that used to come in, because he hadn't got a political axe to grind, and we actually wanted somebody who wasn't going to jump on any bandwagons, but was going to explain “this is what we collect the Community Charge for, this is what it pays for, this is why this council costs more than that council, etc. etc.” And he came in and explained it to us. And because we had used him as an on-air consultant we also used him as an off-air
consultant, if ever we were baffled we would phone him up and say “help”... He sort of came into the frame I suppose in the very, very early days. During the big political punch ups... That’s where we started doing a very public service, information journalism: you know, the “what it means to you” type stuff. And he just stayed with us all the way through. But because things are plainer now we’ve sort of tended not use him very much — which is probably why I’ve forgotten his name’ (Local radio news editor).

‘We never go to politicians for facts, for quite obvious reasons. We go to officials. And they are mandated to give that factual information. And that is always presented in “an expert says” type of way’ (Local radio reporter).

All the local journalists we ‘interviewed’ had had some direct contact with these arbiters in their reporting of the tax.

The arbiters for national journalists tended to be a select group of academics and finance experts (most significantly Tony Travers from the London School of Economics and Rita Hale from the Chartered Institute for Public Finance and Accountancy), local authority associations, public research institutions, and business federations. The inclusion of local authority associations in this list might appear surprising, given the constituents they represent, and the manifest influence that party politics exert on their campaigning stance. Certainly, the issue of political control prevented the Local Government Information Unit from being seen as an arbiter. As one local government specialist explained:

‘The problem we have with [the LGIU] is political balance, and they must know this. They are funded by Trade unions and Labour councils. That means they are in effect a Labour funded organization, which makes it difficult for us to use them as an independent research body.’

However, these concerns only tended to apply to local associations when journalists were dealing with their political membership or leadership. Just as local journalists drew a distinction between councillors and local government officers, so national journalists distinguished between the political leaders of the associations, and the professional experts in their employ.
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In this way, the associations had a dual status – as both advocates and arbiters:

'You can use an officer from the AMA and not use the words "Labour-funded" because he’s speaking as an officer. Similarly for the ADC... If we were talking to politicians from the AMA and the ADC, we would certainly have to do that' (Local government correspondent).

Interestingly, this dual status was not conferred on civil servants at the Department of Environment, despite historical conventions of civil service neutrality. This was mainly because the succession of political rows about the Government's use of civil servants in promoting the tax, made national journalists highly sceptical about the objectivity of any information provided from these official sources. As one put it:

'The poll tax has been so highly political and so fraught with errors and problems, that you had to be suspicious all the way along that [civil servants] were giving you the best gloss, rather than the unvarnished truth' (Local government correspondent).

National journalist had less contact with arbiters than those working at local level. Instead, a two step information flow was evident, in which specialist national local government correspondents played a pivotal role. These correspondents, having far greater experience of the technical issues involved and more diverse and regular contact with sources of expertise, acted as both opinion leaders and as a residual source of in-house expertise for other journalists. This was particularly evident among many of the political correspondents in the lobby, who knew and cared little for the technicalities of local finance, but enjoyed enormously the political dramas that they sparked. During the later stages of the policy cycle, two ex-local government specialists joined the parliamentary press corps, and their knowledge and experience in local finance made them an important source of interpretation and evaluation of the complex issues being raised. One of these specialists became jokingly known as 'Professor Poll Tax' by his colleagues and competitors, and as he wryly observed:

'There were times [in the press gallery of the House of Commons] during the real crisis within the Tory party – when they were revamp-
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...ing it every three months and bringing in new systems – where I was holding more popular briefings up here than the DoE were!

Although journalists valued arbitrating sources as expert and impartial evaluators of the policy, many of these arbiters were actively engaged in the political debate. Furthermore, they were often highly critical of the new system, whether publicly or privately. For example, in early 1990, the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountability (CIPFA) took the unusual step of writing to all MPs, attacking the unrealistic nature of the Government’s £278 average poll tax target, which proved a devastating political intervention that ‘added substantial weight to making the Government appear unreasonable’ (Gibson, 1990: 239). At local level, although many of the local government finance officers acknowledged the dangers and impropriety of being seen to enter publicly into party political debate, they admitted they saw no reason to conceal the administrative difficulties and anomalies of the new system. In the words of one senior local finance officer:

‘I have said off the record to a lot of these reporters that this is the daftest tax anybody ever thought of in their lives. But they know they can’t print that’ (Interview with authors).

Interestingly, the journalists saw no contradiction between the perceived ‘impartiality’ of arbiters and those occasions when they offered critical judgements about the new system. Rather, their expertise and professionalism added resonance to their evaluations, and their views became the hard truths against which all other claims were assessed.

Journalists and their imagined public: ‘We’re simply reflecting what people think’

Journalists are always mindful of their audience when deciding what issues should be reported. Indeed, their sense of professional integrity is bound up in the assumption that they are talking both to, and for, a broad public. However, as mass communicators, journalists are also isolated from the public and often have a high degree of uncertainty about the actual composition, interests and needs of their constituent audiences (McQuail, 1969; Anderson and Meyer, 1988; Elliott, 1972; Golding, 1974). To resolve this tension, journalists rely on professional judgements.
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established practice and idealistic or cynical images of their audience to
guide their editorial decision-making.

These routine uncertainties about the audience, and the accompanying
compensatory strategies, were clearly evident in journalists' reporting of
the Community Charge. However, there was one public message that they
received loud and clear, and from very early on in the policy's introduction.
That was that the public hated the idea. The clarity and resonance of this
message were deduced from four feedback mechanisms: audience corre-
spendence, opinion polls, public demonstrations and electoral outcomes.

Several journalists commented on the intensity and hostility of corre-
spondence towards the poll tax. As one news editor observed:

'The feedback we were getting from our readers was that they just
didn't want it. When it originally came in we had a huge mail bag
about it. A lot of readers writing in saying they didn't want it, they
couldn't understand why the Government was trying to replace the
rates.'

However, journalists were also acutely conscious of the limitations of this
channel of communication. Either because particular media had no forum
for such correspondence ('We don't have a letters spot... Although we're
pleased to receive letters, there's no outlet for us to encourage it. News-
papers do that' [regional news editor]), or because of concerns about its
representativeness:

'One of the things we're in danger of is pandering too much to minority
groups. And it's a big danger in that they're very "pestiferous" and they
know how to manipulate the media and they do it quite successfully
really. And we're ignoring the vast majority of the public' (News editor,
local newspaper).

Opinion polls, however, were seen to provide a far more reliable guide to
views of the majority, and confirmed a widespread and trenchant public
hostility to the tax. Throughout the policy cycle the polls were used as a
barometer of the Government's failure to win the political argument over
the tax and its merits ('No Big poll tax survey shock for Tories', News on
Sunday, 4/10/87; 'Most voters believe poll tax less fair than rating system',

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The Times, 11/1/88; 'Public shift against poll tax', Sunday Telegraph, 17/9/89).

However, it was only when this longstanding antipathy translated into public demonstrations, that many news professionals gained their first sense of the depths of public hostility towards the tax. Many journalists remembered the outbreak of public demonstrations in early 1990 as marking a watershed in their reporting:

'It wasn't something that happened in this region that actually made me perhaps think more seriously about [the poll tax] ... It was a meeting at Nottingham, at the Nottingham City Council where there was the most almighty bloody row and hoo-ha going on and, sort of, total chaos' (Regional TV news editor).

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'If nothing had happened and everybody had accepted the poll tax, it wouldn't have got much space and the poll tax would presumably still be there. It really only became an issue for the media and the Government when the opposition against became so patently obvious' (Regional TV news editor).

When opinion poll data and gestures of public outrage translated into by-election defeats for the Government, the circle was complete ('Tory defeat prompts poll tax re-think', The Times, 24/3/90; 'Ashdown tempers glory with realism - Poll Tax key to shock Ribble Valley result', Guardian, 9/3/91). As one political correspondent put it

'Let's just accept the premise for a second, that [Margaret Thatcher] did

Collectively, these feedback mechanisms not only made journalists acutely sensitive to the depth of public antagonism towards the tax, but also very wary of being implicated as apologists for such an unpopular policy. As one BBC local radio editor acknowledged, the Community Charge had had 'a very rough ride [in the media] ... And rightly so. I mean, if there's some-
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thing that people are feeling passionate about, I think we would be failing in our job if we weren’t testing it, and asking the sorts of questions possibly that people ask in private.’

However, if the evidence of public antipathy exerted a powerful framing influence over reporting, journalists still remained uncertain about many important aspects of public knowledge and opinion. This confusion centred on the audience’s sustained interest in the issue, and their ability to cope with the more complex aspects of the debate. In both instances, journalists relied on their own professional judgements about when the issue had become boring, and whether it would go over the heads of their audience. As one news editor put it:

‘March is when the bills had gone out, demonstrations were starting, you know, the reality was coming home that the poll tax had arrived at last. But, given a month or so, news editors and readers were getting a bit fed up with the poll tax and so they were looking for something else to encourage the readers to buy the newspaper again. It’s as simple as that I think ... As a news editor I have to try and put myself in the shoes of the reader. And that’s difficult, obviously, because I don’t know really what the readers are thinking or saying. But you just have to use your professional judgement. You know, at this stage readers are getting bored with the poll tax and, you know, we’ll ease up on coverage of that. You have to make your judgements I suppose and you assume that that’s how the readers are feeling at the same time. But you may be right, you may be wrong’ (our emphasis).

The crucial point here is that, although public demonstrations played a crucial role in pushing the poll tax to the forefront of the media agenda in March 1990, they could not sustain media attention over the ensuing months. Once it became clear that the violence of the tax revolt hadn’t significantly eroded support for the Labour Party, journalists and news editors rapidly tired of an issue they felt had nowhere else to go:

"When the riots started, people began to take notice a bit more ... The peaks really are determined by the novelty of the issue. I mean the first poll tax protester to be imprisoned was a story but the second, third, fourth, fifth and hundredth isn’t unless someone suddenly sits up and say, says “Hang on a minute, there’s been so many imprisoned we

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ought to do an article summarizing the position” (Local government correspondent).

Underwriting these professional judgements were idealized or cynical constructions of their audience and their probable interests and competences. The influence of this ‘canonical audience’ (Anderson and Meyer, 1988) was very significant in determining which issues related to reform of local government received most attention, particularly in the more populist media. As a senior correspondent for a local radio station explained:

“We are not Radio 4. This station is aimed at a C2/D/E, tabloid reading, tabloid mentality, audience ... We don’t have a great deal of time to go into the complexities of the more obtuse aspects of local government finance ... All the time, we try and personalize everything. It’s always how much are you going to have to pay - not “ratepayers” or “charge-payers in Bradford” - it’s “you”. So it’s always focusing down to the individual, and our perceived audience. That was a conscious editorial decision.’

One regional newsroom actually had a name for their prototypical audience member, and constantly worried about how she might grapple with the information they provided:

“Our archetypal listener is called “Edna”. We call her “Edna”. And she is a 45-plus housewife, living on any large estate you can care to mention anywhere in Cambridgeshire ... Standardized Spending Assessment, I think, that caused us more problems than anything. Trying to explain that in “Edna speak” - again it comes down to “Edna Speak” - how do you explain to Edna, that the Government says that we should only spend X when the County Council are saying we should spend X + Y?’ (Local news editor).

Within this remit the media’s explanatory work concentrated on the pragmatics rather than the principles of local finance: on what people had to pay, rather than how underlying components affected poll tax levels. Even when news media ran explanatory pieces about the broader fiscal context of poll tax levels, they were sceptical about whether their audience were really interested:
Chapter 6: Journalists and the Poll Tax

'I would hate to know what the readership of that sort of explanation was. I think a lot of people just skipped it. All they were bothered about was the bloody “Where?”, “How much?”' (News editor, regional newspaper).

However, despite these examples of how professional judgements and assumptions about audience interests and competences shaped what got reported many journalists were highly resistant to any suggestion that they may have framed the terms of reference of political debate:

'We're simply, you know, transporting the news: reporting it, reflecting it, reflecting what people think and trying to convey the issues' (Editor, regional news programme).

Summary and conclusions

Several key points emerge from our analysis of journalists' and their news gathering on the Community Charge.

First, different journalist and news organizations' reporting of the tax emerged from distinct environments. Whereas the national media were locked into the passage of events and dramas viewed from the legislature, local media focused on the direct experience of the local state. As we see later, these distinct orientations were crucial in creating the evaluative differences noted between local and national coverage. However, the local news agenda was influenced at an interpretative level by the national media, whether through daily exposure to national coverage or on-line news agency information.

Second, specialist correspondents in the national media interacted differently with news sources in reporting the tax and had different perspectives on it. Political correspondents focused their news gathering around Parliament, had only a transient interest in the issue, and largely disregarded the more technical aspects of the debate. By comparison, local government correspondents engaged in more diverse and specialized news gathering on the issue, had a more thorough grasp of its detail and gave more consistent attention to it. This had a clear impact on how these correspondents reported the policy.

Third, in comparing the performance of 'advocates', news organizations
assigned the greatest news value to the views of critics within the Conservative Party. Although journalists were highly critical of the perceived incompetence of Government's campaign work, this was seen as largely symptomatic of the political problems created by the divisions within its own ranks. In the national media, it was the political correspondents who first picked up on the seriousness of the divisions within the Conservative Party, and who—during the latter stages of the policy—were made privy to the serious reservations of several senior Government ministers. This unreported knowledge was widely circulated and influenced journalists' evaluations of these ministers' public proclamations.

Fourth, local and national media sectors used different 'arbiters' to adjudicate over the complexities of the debate. The main influence of these sources was at an evaluative rather than interpretative level. Locally, the main arbiters were the local government finance officers responsible for administering the tax, who were routinely accessed by a wide range of local reporters. Nationally, the principal arbiters were academics, public research institutes, and local authority associations, and contact was mainly conducted via specialist local government correspondents. In this respect, these reporters were the principal mechanism by which national news organizations became sensitized to the often extremely critical judgements delivered publicly or privately by these sources.

Fifth, public opinion exerted a considerable influence over how journalists and editors reported the issue. News professionals recognized that the public disliked the tax from very early in the policy cycle, and the constancy of this antipathy both sustained and legitimized their own scepticism about the policy. In March 1990, the outbreak of public demonstrations was a crucial element in driving the issue to the forefront of the news agenda. However, although clearly aware of public antipathy, news professionals were also uncertain about many other aspects of public opinion and knowledge, and relied heavily on their own judgements about what their audiences find interesting and would understand. These assumptions were crucial in determining which issues were reported and which were neglected, and in legitimating a reduction in media attention to the issue during later stages of the policy cycle. In this respect journalists actively constructed, rather than reflected, public concerns.
Chapter 7

The Politics of Political Communication: The Determinants and Impact of Poll Tax News

In this final substantive chapter of the book we address two important remaining tasks. The first is to draw together the threads of the content analysis and journalist and news source interviews specifically to explain the factors that contributed to the construction of media discourses on the Community Charge. The second is to explore whether these discourses had any impact on the formation of public opinion. It is widely assumed that the poll tax failed because it never secured public support. Yet commentators have been generally incurious about exploring how its credibility was so emphatically eroded. In this chapter we present evidence that suggests the media, whilst being influenced by public antipathy, also exerted a considerable influence in shaping public opinion – both in providing information about the tax and drawing public attention towards some features of it, and away from others.

The origins of poll tax news

The media reporting of the Community Charge begs a range of questions. Why were several important aspects of the broader political debate ignored by the media? What were the reasons for the disparities in local and national reporting? How can we explain the broad consensus of media derision that had established itself by 1990? Why did certain media evaluations of the policy shift over time? And why was the tax neglected during its formative stages? In this section we address these questions under three broad discussions that explore the reasons behind the shifting intensity of media coverage, its interpretative limitations and evaluative hostility.
**The shifting intensity of national media coverage**

'What about the issues which are around but which the parties do not push and television does not spot? And the classic example of that seems to me, in '87, the poll tax ... Looking back on it, it's quite clear now that we should have dug harder and been able to find the poll tax, because it was around there if we had looked at it and looked for it hard enough' (Michael Brunson, Political Editor, ITN, quoted in Democracy in Danger, Channel 4, 18/3/92).

'The Poll Tax? That's old hat!' (Regional TV news editor observed at a morning editorial meeting, May 1990).

We have seen that the intensity of national media coverage of the Community Charge often bore little relation to the policy timetable itself. Indeed, many important periods in the implementation and abolition of the policy passed with only a modicum of media coverage. If these results suggest that in this instance the watchdog of democracy was both disturbingly myopic and easily distracted, we need to consider the reasons for this initial inattention and subsequent disinterest.

The fluctuation in national media coverage was the product of two interrelated factors. The first was the prominence, or otherwise, of key news sources in public discussion about the policy, and their public disposition towards it. The second was the news professionals' perceptions of the intrinsic news-worthiness of the issue.

It is clear that national media coverage was not fundamentally driven by the policy cycle, but rather by political events - or, to be more precise, the parliamentary process. If an issue is marginalized by the main political parties, it is highly unlikely to attract consistent attention in the media. Therefore, because the Government and the main political opposition avoided the issue before the 1987 General Election - for reasons discussed earlier - it is not surprising that the tax only started to attract attention after the electoral die had been cast.

Furthermore, because the media were never primarily interested in local finance policy *per se*, but rather in the political controversy the issue generated, the nature and composition of debate within the parliamentary arena had a direct bearing on the amount of attention the media gave to
Chapter 7: The Politics of Political Communication

the issue. When inter-party duelling transformed into intra-party dissent, the issue gained a far greater news worthiness; when these divisions disappeared, media interest waned. During the earliest stages, party political debate was strictly divided along party lines: Conservative dissent hadn’t mobilized, and many of the tax’s later critics supported the policy. It was only with the legislative period for England and Wales, and the first Conservative rebellions, that the issue started to attract sufficient parliamentary status and party political ‘spin’ to gain sustained media attention. Once these party divisions gaped open, and coincided with open rebellion in ‘little England’ and the inner cities, in March 1990, the components were all in place to ensure an intensive, if transient, period of media concern.

However, just as the rise of the poll tax in the national media arena was directly influenced by transformations in the parliamentary arena, so its decline was underwritten by alterations in the configuration of party political debate. While public demonstrations were momentarily influential in attracting media coverage, their news value decreased as their novelty declined (although public demonstrations and non-payment campaigns continued into 1992). Journalists refocused their attention on the party political arena. However, the assuaging of Conservative dissent meant the issue lost its most reportable political ‘spin’, and reduced the controversy over the Council Tax to just one more inter-party dispute amongst many. As the wider cacophony increased in the lead up to the General Election, the poll tax became inaudible, despite the persistent efforts of the Labour Party to revive its spectre during the legislative passage of the Council Tax and the 1992 Election campaign.

However, in emphasizing the heavy reliance of the media on key political sources to identify the issue during the early stages of the policy’s implementation. It is also important to appreciate that this dependency lessened during later stages of the cycle. Whereas in the early stages many journalists were ignorant about the policy and its likely effects and highly source-dependent, by the most intense phase of media coverage in 1990 they were more informed and sensitive to the issue, and consequently less reactive—often raising the issue in spite of the damage limitation strategies of the party news managers. In doing so, they amplified and influenced developments within the political arena. This increased awareness also meant that the professional judgements of the journalists and their editors exerted a far greater independent influence over deciding the relative
prominence of the issue over subsequent periods. In this respect, the constrained parameters of news coverage also produced a repetitiveness that journalists and news editors soon found tedious, and accelerated the issue's decline in national coverage. As a news editor on a large regional newspaper put it four months after the repeal of the tax had been announced:

"There's a story today: "Britain's oldest poll tax prisoner was released from jail today". Oh that it should come to this! ... It's getting to the stage of a freak-show: he's the oldest so therefore that makes it unusual. I don't know whether we actually did, but I'm sure that every possible avenue has been explored ... "Poll tax" is now a narcoleptic word to use in a newspaper office. You say "poll tax" and most journalists start to nod off. It's a bit difficult to get excited about for me I'm afraid. I know it's a serious and abiding issue but, er ..."
determining which events are most likely to be selected and reported as ‘news’ (Galtung and Ruge, 1969; Golding and Elliott, 1979; Ericson et al., 1987; Chibnall, 1977). These values are a product of the pressures of the news production process and embody professional assumptions about the interests and needs of the mass audience. Essentially, the less complex and ambiguous an issue is, the more readily it can be personalized and dramatized, shown to have clear and immediate implications, and is consonant with previous news frameworks, the more likely it is to be reported. It is no coincidence that all the absences in coverage of the Community Charge contravened one or more of these criteria. Standardized Spending Assessments may have been of pivotal importance to poll tax levels—and thereby the system’s political viability—but their complexity made them appear dry and arcane to many journalists (who, indeed, struggled to understand them). Evidence of the impact of the new tax on voter registration took some time to emerge, and when it was presented, proved difficult to isolate from the influence of other factors, such as the long term decline in voter registration and changes in the registration policy of electoral officers in certain areas (Butler and Kavanagh, 1992). The centralization of control of non-domestic rate revenue may have significantly eroded local government autonomy, but it lacked the personal drama that characterized previous clashes between the Thatcher Government and the demons of the municipal left.

By recognizing that news values systematically diverted journalists from the long term and technical aspects of the debate, we can also understand why many journalists viewed the poll tax as an easy issue to report. News values both sustained and legitimized a disregard for the more recondite aspects of the policy debate.

The exclusion of these issues from mainstream media discourses was also compounded by the political antagonism of many journalists towards some of the broader issues they raised. For example, there were few apologists for local government among the journalists we interviewed at either local or national level. As one parliamentary correspondent put it:

‘You’re not going to get any decent stories in [the paper] which say ‘Poor old local government, it’s had its power stripped’. People would say “well Hooray for that! That daft old bugger down the Town Hall!”’

Similarly, the impact of the new tax on voter registration and the prospect
of increased intrusiveness by local government were subsumed by the political antagonism of journalists towards those advocating the non-payment strategy." As one national journalist explained:

'You see the civil liberties issue became confused with the law breaking issue. There was a dilemma on deciding whether these were people whose civil liberties were being infringed or these were people who were breaking the law and should face the consequences?'.

The marginalization of these various issues from media discourses was further compounded by the changing information strategies of several of the main participants in the broader debate. For example, whereas the Labour Party and certain local authority associations frequently drew attention to the constitutional and privacy implications of the tax during the early stages of the policy debate, they mentioned these issues far less frequently during the latter stages. Away from the party political arena, the civil liberties pressure group, Liberty, who initially played a pivotal role in highlighting the privacy issues raised by the new system, latterly shifted its campaign work towards challenging judicial abuses in the prosecution of non-payees.

The reasons for these changes in the interpretative focus of news sources varied. In some cases, their shift reflected political considerations. For example, as the Labour Party came under attack over the issue of non-payment, its leadership became far more nervous about the disenfranchise­ment issue. Similarly, as local authorities saw their revenue dwindle due to persistently high non-payment levels, they became less concerned with politicizing the electorate and more concerned about preserving their financial reserves.

On another level, these changes revealed how political sources became increasingly adept at recognizing which issues would play most effectively in the media arena, and cut their campaign cloth accordingly. During the early stages of the policy cycle the media appeared to have difficulty in locating the issue within pre-existing news frameworks. This had two effects. On the one level it made coverage highly intermittent, but it also meant that the media were more receptive to these alternative agendas.

* For example, several local newspapers had no compunction about printing the names and addresses of local residents who had been served with liability orders for not paying the tax (UK Press Gazette, 24/9/90).
Chapter 7: The Politics of Political Communication

about the tax. However, once the media were able to place the issue within the more familiar context of inter (and intra) party dispute, their interpretative focus constricted. In turn, several of the main news sources shifted their campaign agendas, in a way that both reflected and accelerated this political compression. In other words, a 'vocabulary of precedents' (Eri­sson et al., 1987, 1989) quickly developed between journalists and news sources in the reporting of this issue, which exerted a powerful framing influence over subsequent coverage and information provision.

Finally, the changes revealed the limited 'carrying capacities' (Hilgartner and Bosk, 1988) of several key political sources, and their inability to campaign on more than one front. For example, once the civil liberty group, Liberty, became increasingly embroiled in the debate about the denials of defendants' legal rights, it had seriously to curtail its campaign work on the broader privacy implications of the tax. As a crucial information source on this area, its shift also accelerated the marginalization of the issue in media discourses.

Evaluations: the sources of media hostility

In many respects one of the most fascinating aspects to this debate is explaining why the British media - collectively not renowned for their rabid anti-Conservatism - were so critical of the Community Charge? And what does this suggest about the conditions and limitations of state agenda-building? It is important to emphasize that the Government's failure was at an evaluative rather than interpretative level, in that there was no fundamental challenge by the media to the ideological parameters of the Government's case for reforming local government finance. If the Government's ideological offensive foundered under media scrutiny, it did so on its own terms.

Another important qualification is that not all sections of the media were consistently hostile to the tax and its objectives. Although all of the journalists we interviewed claimed they had always recognized the tax to be fatally flawed, one has to wonder about the influence hindsight may have had in shaping such critical clarity. (All interviews were conducted after the abolition of the tax had been announced.) Whilst not denying there

* For example, civil liberties questions were among the most prominent themes in media coverage during the consultative period.
was often an early and considerable scepticism in many sectors of the media about the tax (particularly in the local media), our content analysis reveals that many influential sections of the media initially quite liked the idea, and only changed their stance during the tax's later crises. This leads one to question whether the journalistic consensus about the deficiencies of the system would have been so absolute, had the same questions been asked as the political debate was still active? At the very least, the content analysis suggests there was a process involved in the political delegitimization of the Community Charge. Somewhere, somehow, an argument was lost.

To explain the evaluative hostility of the media, we need to appreciate the distinctive roles played by advocates and arbiters in shaping media opinion. Firstly, the battle lines of advocacy in the debate were hugely unbalanced. The policy attracted a swathe of criticism from both private and public sectors, voluntary agencies and all the opposition parties. However, particularly significant were the major divisions within the Conservative Party ranks, which eventually extended to the most senior echelons of the Government. Not only were these internal wranglings intrinsically newsworthy, but the prevalence of Conservative dissent prevented the media from organizing their analysis along conventional party political lines. As one very influential broadcast journalist observed:

"By the end it was a bit like Apartheid ... You didn't have to balance the thing. You did at the beginning because everyone was divided on party lines, but by the end most Tories were condemning it as well and the Government was saying "well we're going to review it" ... So you didn't have to go through a farce of saying "but on the other hand they're saying everything's going smoothly"."

In conjunction with the imbalance in political advocacy, the arbiters of news coverage played a crucial part in securing the critical antipathy of the news media. None of the arbiters elected by journalists at local or national level corroborated the Government claims, and indeed many were openly critical of the new system.

The greater hostility of the local media towards the policy than their national counterparts, can also be explained with these factors in mind. If support for the Government's flagship was scant at a national level, it was almost completely absent locally. In this respect the Government's aliena-
tion of local government opinion in imposing the system, proved highly significant. Local authorities played a key role in informing and defining local media agendas on the poll tax, partly through the increasing, if variable, efficiency of their press, marketing and public relations departments, but also because of their traditional prominence in the routine newsbeats of the provincial media. This secured them a privileged access, and thereby an important definitional advantage.

Recognizing how the patterns of advocacy at both national and local levels altered as the policy process developed, also helps explain why certain sections of the national media initially supported the tax. Even during the back bench rebellions that marked the passage of the legislation for England and Wales, the Government could still depend upon a significant rump of opinion in the parliamentary party to support the principles of the policy. However, once the Conservative right crossed the rubicon, and openly attacked the tax, the isolation of the Prime Minister was complete. The Thatcherite press could no longer construct the debate as part of a covert, left wing challenge to the Party leadership, and it is no coincidence that the last vestiges of media support evaporated at the same time as these high level defections.

Public perceptions and popular representation

"The public have not been persuaded that the [Community] Charge is fair" (Michael Heseltine, Secretary of State for the Environment, House of Commons, 21 March 1991).

We have seen how the main protagonists in the political debate over the poll tax presumed the media would play a key role in the battle for the hearts and minds of the British electorate. This presumption, in itself, constituted a very significant area of media influence, as the political process itself was contorted and distorted by the pursuit of editorial support. However, what evidence is there to support these political calculations about the public salience of the media? Although the primary research upon which this book is based contained no specific audience related component, the wealth of opinion poll data on public knowledge of and attitudes towards the Community Charge does provide an opportunity for comparisons that are at least suggestive about the relationship between media representations and public perceptions.
Public attitudes and media coverage

"The man in charge of the Community Charge register in Strathclyde said last week he was surprised to discover that there are 1,097 people in Strathclyde called "Donald Duck" (Today, BBC Radio 4, 4 April 1989).

When tracing public attitudes in England and Wales towards the Community Charge over several years, there is little evidence of an independent media influence (See Table 7.1). Any initial public equivocation towards the policy rapidly translated into a confirmed and consistent hostility: from October 1987 onwards opposition to the tax never fell below 60 per cent, and by the time of its introduction consistently exceeded 70 per cent. Clearly, once the electorate began to understand the policy and its implications, the majority disliked it, and nothing shifted them from that opposition.

Table 7.1. Public Attitudes to the poll tax in England and Wales (1987–1990)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fieldwork</th>
<th>Poll</th>
<th>Sample</th>
<th>For</th>
<th>Against</th>
<th>Don’t know</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>11/6/87</td>
<td>MORI/The Times</td>
<td>1023</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22–29/9/87</td>
<td>MORI/Sunday Times</td>
<td>1502</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24–30/9/87</td>
<td>MORI/AMA/COSSL A</td>
<td>1866</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19/10/87</td>
<td>MORI/Sunday Times</td>
<td>1109</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29–30/10/87</td>
<td>MORI/Sunday Times</td>
<td>1000</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17–18/3/88</td>
<td>MORI/Sunday Times</td>
<td>1075</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25–30/11/88</td>
<td>MORI/Sunday Times</td>
<td>817</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16–17/3/89</td>
<td>MORI/Sunday Times</td>
<td>1098</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22–23/11/89</td>
<td>MORI/Sunday Times</td>
<td>1068</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10–12/2/90</td>
<td>NOP/Independent/BBC1</td>
<td>1577</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19–24/4/90</td>
<td>MORI/The Times</td>
<td>1887</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

If the media did have an impact on public attitudes, it was most likely to have been in reinforcing public scepticism. Such an interpretation is consistent with the evidence from the journalist interviews, where the persistent antipathy of the public was widely cited by news professionals as a crucial contextual factor in shaping their own perceptions of the political viability of the policy. However, as a qualification to this general observation, it is interesting to note that the only recorded instance where public support for the policy exceeded public opposition was on the day of the 1987 General Election, which had been preceded by an almost complete
absence of media coverage. A case, perhaps, of media influence by omission?

Further evidence of the resilience of public attitudes to media definitions emerges from polls conducted during the political furore over the poll tax demonstrations of March 1990. As we have seen, the Government successfully managed to shift media interpretations of the political significance of the demonstrations away from a framework that emphasized their negative implications for it, towards one fixated with conspiracy theories and the detrimental consequences of the riots for its political opponents.

Although the apparent success of this tactic sent shock waves through the Labour leadership - forcing them into ever more strident denunciations of those advocating non payment - it is clear that the public was very resistant to this diversion. Popular support for Labour increased to record levels and was sustained through March and April 1990, despite the media hysteria over the violence of the Trafalgar Square riot, and the Home Secretary's attempt to link the civil disobedience of non payment with the criminal act of 'breaking policemen's heads'. Indeed, an ICM poll conducted a week after the riot, found that two-thirds of respondents rejected the Home Secretary's assertion that Labour were to blame for the violence, more than a third directly blamed the Government for the violence, and over half said they didn't think the Labour leadership should take action against Party members refusing to pay the tax. A significant minority also said they thought the violence was understandable because of the unfairness of the tax (Sunday Correspondent, 8/4/90).

Here again, the consistency of public opinion exerted a considerable refractive influence on media evaluations. Once it became clear that the controversy over the demonstrations was not easing the electoral pressure on the Government, journalistic interest in the 'problems for Labour' issue disappeared and attention redirected on to the Government's travails.

However, if public attitudes appear to have been largely independent of, and resilient to, media evaluations (and indeed may have played a crucial role in shaping them) it doesn't necessarily follow that the media had only limited influence over public perceptions of the tax. Indeed, by restricting our search for media influence to attitudinal data, we are probably - to quote a familiar phrase - looking in the wrong place. Indeed, when we examine the extent of public knowledge of the tax, and its varying public salience, a more dramatic picture emerges.
Throughout the policy cycle, research consistently highlighted the primary importance of the mass media as an information source about the tax. In 1988, a survey in Leeds found that 87 per cent of respondents cited ‘television and radio’ as their main source of information about the policy, and 71 per cent, ‘newspapers’. (By comparison, Government information was cited by only 13 per cent and council information by 8 per cent.) Furthermore, local media featured very prominently in the respondents’ media consumption (Campbell et al, 1988). Later research confirmed this pattern – although by that stage other information sources had gained in importance. For example, a study into the effectiveness of the Welsh Office’s public information campaign on the Community Charge (National Consumer Council, 1989) found television to be the main information source (40 per cent), followed by Welsh Office information (39 per cent); and local authority information (18 per cent). Similarly, a MORI survey (1989), commissioned by Leicester City Council, found that 51 per cent of respondents in the Leicester area, identified television as their most important source, followed by the local press (38 per cent) and a generic category of ‘leaflets’ (37 per cent).

The salience of the media as an information source is further confirmed when we examine the extent of public knowledge about this complex policy issue. The Leeds survey found that although 99 per cent of respondents had heard of the poll tax, there was evident confusion among a significant minority of respondents about its linkage with the right to vote and the existence and operation of the Uniform Business Rate (Campbell et al., op. cit.). A survey of small business people in England and Wales, in December 1989, found that 76 per cent hadn’t heard of the Uniform Business Rate; 87 per cent had no idea what ‘UBR’ meant; 95 per cent didn’t know how it would affect their business; and 92 per cent didn’t know what they could do about it (NFSE, 1990). In June and July 1990, a survey by the Policy Studies Institute into public attitudes to local government found that only 15 per cent of respondents knew that revenue from the Community Charge accounted for only around a quarter of local authority revenue (Bloch and John, 1991).

What is significant about these findings is how closely these areas of public confusion coincided with the absences noted in media coverage. Clearly, although the media may have had a central role in informing the public of
Chapter 7: The Politics of Political Communication

this hugely significant policy innovation, as the new era of local accountability dawned, they were conspicuously unsuccessful in increasing public understanding of important basic principles and mechanisms of local democracy and finance.

News priorities and public priorities

If the media may have compounded public ignorance about many important aspects of the policy, they also appear to have played a crucial role in drawing public attention towards and away from the issue. Figure 7.1 compares aggregated opinion poll data on the changing public perceptions of the salience of the issue in England and Wales with national press coverage, between April 1988 and September 1991, and highlights a dramatic correlation between the two.† Just as the poll tax dropped down the media agenda after its legislative passage, so it receded from public attention. However, as the prospect of its introduction in England and Wales approached, public concern increased, slowly at first, and then dramatically in March 1990. However, once introduced, public attention to the issue faded in a manner and at a pace almost identical to that in the media, only to be revitalized in November 1990 and March 1991, coinciding exactly with the two final bursts of coverage. After the Government's

* 'Public salience' is measured here by a question in monthly public opinion surveys conducted by MORI in England and Wales designed to assess which issues were considered to be 'most important' or 'other important'. The pattern revealed here is supported by similar data collected by NOP over the same period. In response to the question 'What are the most important issues which are influencing the way you intend to vote?', 22 per cent cited the poll tax in January 1990, rising to 50 per cent in March 1990, and falling to 47 per cent in May 1990. In January 1991, 37 per cent cited the poll tax, rising to 58 per cent in March 1991, and then swiftly falling to 19 per cent in August 1991. It is important to appreciate that these figures relate to England and Wales only. Public perceptions in Scotland revealed a different pattern, reflecting the policy's earlier implementation, and the greater intensity of media coverage during the policy's early stages.

† Correlating public opinion and media content in this manner can be problematic. One of the most serious criticisms is that in doing so one is not comparing like with like (Van IJere and Dunlap, 1980). For example, comparisons of environmental news with the salience of environmental issues in the public agendas are seriously compromised by the broad and diverse range of issues that are included within such an imprecise category. However, this is not a problem in this instance. From April 1988, MORI assigned a specific category to measure public attention to the 'poll tax' and the specificity of this category clearly permits a close comparison with the content analysis data.
Council Tax announcement the issue was quickly relegated in the public agenda, and by the 1992 General Election had almost completely disappeared from public attention.

Is it possible that the relationship between public attention and media representation is spurious? The most obvious alternative explanation — that public concern was solely driven by the material impact of the policy on people's spending — cannot account for the timing in the shifts in public attention. The public in England and Wales were most concerned about the Community Charge before they had paid a penny, but as the first payments were made, and the controversial process of enforcement began, the salience of the issue receded in public importance. It then briefly re-emerged in November 1990 — halfway through the financial year of local authorities, and eight months after the tax had been introduced. Clearly, some factor other than the continued financial burden of the Community Charge conspired to push it back on to the public agenda at this juncture. The final, rapid and complete relegation of the issue from May 1991 onwards is also difficult to account for materially, when one considers that the tax still had two years to run, and many who had successfully avoided the tax during its first year were remorselessly tracked down over this period by local authorities desperate for revenue and increasingly unsympathetic to non-payers.
If, as seems clear, media coverage and public opinion were closely related, a further question presents itself: which factors exerted the greater influence over the other? One obvious explanation is that the media were largely mirroring shifts in public opinion, rather than creating them. However, there are two main problems with this argument. First, had public concerns been the driving force behind media attention, there should have been a clear lag between the public opinion and media data. This is because the opinion poll data was collected at the end of each month, whereas the media data quantifies the cumulative coverage for each month. The almost identical convergence of the two patterns confirms that news priorities shifted before any equivalent change in public concerns had been empirically established. Second, the journalist interviews demonstrated how isolated news professionals were from the public they addressed, and how their editorial decisions were driven by assumptions about public interests and capabilities. Rather than meticulously consulting public concerns, journalists trusted their own judgements about what their audience would find relevant. Even when public actions forced the issue to the forefront of the media agenda, as was the case with the widespread demonstrations of March 1990, this influence was largely transient, as journalists quickly tired of these performative gestures, and looked for other issues to sustain their attention.

This suggests the media were of primary significance in setting the public agenda. However, in arguing this we recognize the dangers of proposing a crude transmission model of media influence (Elliott, 1972; Hansen, 1991) – where it is assumed that powerful news sources shape media agendas, which in turn determine public agendas, in a linear and non-reciprocated manner. Throughout this book we have identified several examples of where policy debates, public perceptions and media representations interacted dynamically in the formation of political discourses on the poll tax. However, we would emphasize that the interaction and feedback between these various arenas is structurally imbalanced, with certain arenas 'over-accessing' others. And whereas the public are constantly exposed to media messages in the formation of their political opinions, the public are largely an abstracted presence for journalists, whose opinions and needs they can only imperfectly know.
Summary and conclusions

In this chapter we have explored the formative political dynamics that shaped media reporting of the introduction and abolition of the Community Charge, and the impact that media representations may have had on public perceptions of the tax.

Three crucial points emerged regarding the construction of media agendas on the poll tax. First, the shifting intensity of media attention to the issue throughout the policy cycle reflected, on the one hand, the activity and public disposition of key political sources on the issue and, on the other, professional judgements by journalists as to the news value of the issue. Because the media were more interested in the political battles the poll tax sparked, rather than the substantive issues it raised, their interest in the issue was heavily dependent on the currency of the issue in key political arenas. The political and electoral implications of this should not be underestimated. This was a major, controversial reform that, due to the negligence of the media, was smuggled in under the noses of the electorate, and then prematurely whisked away from view. Furthermore, the fact that the most complete periods of silence coincided with two national elections, was no accident.

Second, the limited interpretative parameters of media coverage were partly due to the application of news values and journalists' political prejudices to this complex area. However, they also reflected the changing information strategies of key news sources, who altered their tactics and campaign agendas as the policy cycle unfolded.

Third, the widespread hostility towards the tax across all media sectors by 1990 was created by the imbalance in the patterns of advocacy and the critical interventions made publicly and privately by arbiters. Particularly significant was the prevalence of Conservative Party dissent, which prevented the media from constructing the issue as a party political conflict. The greater hostility evident in local coverage reflected the structural orientation of the local media to the local state and their lengthier exposure to a greater unanimity of critical opinion.

Concerning the relationship between the media and public opinion, the data highlights both the dependence and independence of public perceptions on media representations. The media's influence does not seem to have operated at an evaluative level, but rather at an interpretative level.
The public never liked the idea of the Community Charge and, indeed, their resilient antagonism fed the media's own scepticism about the advisability of the policy change. However, the public relied heavily on the media for information about the new tax, and displayed political blindspots that corresponded very closely to the noted absences in media content. On another level, public perceptions of the salience of the issue closely tracked the ebb and flow of media coverage rather than the policy timetable itself. Collectively, these findings provide clear, *prima facie* support to the classic agenda-setting proposition: that the media may not tell us what to think, but they are very influential in telling us what to think about (Cohen, 1963), and strongly confirms the presumption of the main protagonists in the debate, that the media would be the principal political arena in which the public battle for the poll tax would be fought.
Appendix 2

References

Taxation and Representation: The Media, Political Communication and the Poll Tax

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Chapter 3

Charitable images
The construction of voluntary sector news

David Deacon

Introduction

It is an established social convention that personal acts of charity should be accompanied by a degree of modesty. But while individuals are expected to keep their altruism quiet, organisations thrive on publicity which is the life-blood of charitable and voluntary activity. It is essential for the economic viability of voluntary organisations and one of the key mechanisms by which they gain public credibility and exert political influence. Moreover, the significance of communication issues for the voluntary sector is increasing, for a range of social, political and economic reasons. This chapter explains why this is so and examines an important but neglected issue concerning public communication in this area: the role played by the mainstream news media in publicising different types of charitable and voluntary activity.

The changing role of the voluntary sector

To understand why communication considerations have gained importance for voluntary organisations, it is necessary to appreciate the significant changes that have transformed their social, civic and political roles since the 1970s. This period has witnessed major retrenchments in the role of the state in welfare provision, prompted by spiralling costs of state provision during periods of economic uncertainty, and by a ‘crisis in values’ in the desirability of state intervention (Deakin 1987: 172). In this context, the voluntary sector has been ‘rediscovered’ by commentators across the political spectrum and in many different national contexts (Kuhnel and Selle 1992).

In Britain, voluntary provision has been actively encouraged by successive political administrations, albeit with slightly different inflections. In the statutory social welfare system of the 1970s, the rhetoric of community and participation heralded a new age for voluntary organisations. In particular, a new concept of statutory–voluntary partnership arose (Wolfenden 1978). In the 1980s and early 1990s, successive Conservative administrations sought to roll back the frontiers of the state, and the voluntary sector was expected to
step into the breach, fortified by corporate and public altruism (Thatcher 1983; Major 1992). Since Labour's election victory in 1997, expectations of the sector remain high, although the rhetoric has shifted away from notions of the displacement of statutory provision, and back towards concepts of partnership (Noble 1997). Drawing on the recommendations of the Deakin Commission on the Future of the Voluntary Sector (Deakin 1996), the Blair government is now seeking to develop a 'compact' with the sector, in which policy makers in both central and local government are being urged to 'think voluntary' (Guardian, 18 February 1998).

As expectations of the sector have increased, so there has been a dramatic growth in the range of voluntary activity (although this proliferation should not be seen simply as a response to policy makers' growing demands). The Charity Commission (1998) lists 187,000 charities on its official register for England and Wales, commanding an income of £18.3 billion. In 1996 there were 10,000 new additions to the Commission's register, balanced by an equivalent number of closures and mergers (Charity Commission 1997). These figures underestimate the total range of voluntary activity, since there are many more agencies that conform to what could legitimately be described as voluntary agencies, but which are not registered as charities.

This increased social presence and responsibility has brought considerable pressures and uncertainties for the sector. On a financial level, voluntary provision has altered significantly. First, statutory sector support has changed, most significantly in the emergence of a 'contract culture' where voluntary organisations are required to compete for government contracts to deliver public services (Taylor 1992). Second, government attempts to foster private support (through public, trust and corporate giving) have met with variable success. According to recent research, donations from the public fell by 20 per cent in real terms between 1993 and 1996 and the proportion of individuals donating fell from 81 per cent to 68 per cent for the same period (NCVO 1998). These losses, moreover, have not been offset uniformly by revenue from other sources, such as revenue from the National Lottery, corporate sponsorship, trading income and investment income. Between 1994 and 1997 there was a mere 2 per cent increase in the sector's income, with medium-sized charities recording a fall of 3.4 per cent.

Aside from the financial difficulties triggered by this decline in public giving, concerns have been expressed that it may be symptomatic of a deeper malaise in public attitudes towards the sector. Voluntary organisations and charities have traditionally attracted high levels of public support and approval, but some claim 'donor fatigue' is on the increase and that a generation gap may be opening up. According to NCVO research, younger people are becoming more 'consumerist' about charities than older age groups, and expect more feedback about what is achieved with their donations (Brindle 1998). Furthermore, despite a Home Office minister's recent insistence that 'Young people believe "it's cool to care"' (Home Office News Release, 28 January...
A study by the Institute of Volunteering Research found that 43 per cent of people aged 18 to 24 acted as volunteers in 1997, compared with 55 per cent in 1991. Additionally, the amount of time they spent volunteering dropped from 2.7 hours to 0.7 hours (Brindle 1998). These findings coincided with a report from Voluntary Service Overseas that revealed a rapid decline in recruits for the first time in 40 years (Guardian, 22 February 1998).

Consequently, growing numbers of voluntary organisations are having to compete ever more widely for a shifting and, in some senses, shrinking pool of resources. At the same time they are having to work harder to demonstrate their accountability and credibility to the public (Baird 1996). Added to these financial and social uncertainties are quandaries about the political functions appropriate to voluntary organisations. Although successive Conservative governments between 1979 and 1997 encouraged the growth of charities and voluntary organisations, they were less willing to accept an increase in their political influence (Golding 1992). Nevertheless, a broad consensus emerged within the sector that urged a more active, campaigning role for organisations (see NCVO 1990: Chapter 3).

A situation where voluntary organisations can be both agents of governmental policy as well as advocates of causes is a recipe for uncertainty. Advocacy may place groups in direct conflict with the institutions that support them. Furthermore, it can often take organisations uncomfortably close to the terrain of party politics, which – for groups with charitable status at least – raises a host of serious issues, as there are long-standing regulations prohibiting inappropriate political activities by charities. Despite a recent review and 'relaxation' of these rules (Charity Commission 1995), they remain stringent (Burr 1998).

It remains to be seen how political relations will develop between the voluntary sector and the new Labour administration, but it is highly unlikely that political tensions between statutory and voluntary sectors will evaporate. In June 1998, for example, there was a high profile spat between Clare Short, the Minister for International Development, and several of the major international aid charities over disaster relief in Southern Sudan. In the Minister's view, the high profile humanitarian appeals initiated in response to this crisis had 'muddled the message' about the problem, which she claimed was rooted in political and military instability in the region rather than a lack of resources. Furthermore, she felt overly emotive campaigning deflected attention away from development issues and fostered public pessimism and cynicism (Independent, 29 May 1998). In response, one senior representative from the Aid agencies argued that her attack was equivalent to 'blaming 999 crews because we have a lot of accidents' (Daily Telegraph, 29 May 1998).
Public communication and the voluntary sector: the growing imperative

Because of these general uncertainties in seeking funds, contributing to political debate and securing public trust, the need for voluntary agencies to communicate effectively with the general public and external agencies has become acute. Consequently, many voluntary and charitable organisations have sought to develop their publicity work, utilising marketing and PR techniques developed in the private sector. A recent survey by the Charities Aid Foundation (CAF) (Pharoah and Welchman 1997), however, found 'a very mixed picture of the extent to which charities are gearing up for the challenge of future public communications' (Pharoah and Welchman 1997: 27). The research identified a core group developing 'consistently more strategic approaches to communication' (ibid.: 28), which tended to be the larger, better resourced organisations. This supports earlier evidence of concentration of PR and marketing activity at the affluent end of the sector (Fenton et al. 1993; Bell 1994; Deacon 1996).

What are the implications of this growing divide in voluntary sector initiated public communication? Some claim the growing slickness and persistence of some charitable marketing has inadvertently fuelled a growth in public apathy and 'donor fatigue' (Eastwood 1998), but there is little evidence to support this argument. For instance, the agencies which are most proactive in marketing terms have substantially increased their revenue from public donations over recent years, whereas it is the so-called 'Cinderella charities' (Rowe and Thorpe 1998) — the middle-income charities which are shown to be less able and inclined to grasp the promotional nettle — that have been hardest hit by the downturn in public giving. Research has also shown that the age group that is allegedly most remote and questioning in fund-raising terms (young people) tends to be least concerned about the growing professionalism of voluntary sector marketing (Gaskin et at. 1996: 10–11). This is perhaps not surprising, for if we are witnessing a shift from more static, habitualised patterns of charitable giving to a more 'consumerist' mentality (NCVO News Release, 22 January 1998), marketing will inevitably assume greater significance, as it is the structural means by which consumers are hailed by competing public and commercial interests.

One of the main conclusions of the CAF study was that small and medium-sized charities urgently needed 'to review their organisational skills and resources in relation to public communications' (ibid.: 28) to close the widening communication gulf. But given that 'cost' was consistently identified as the greatest inhibiting factor on the development and implementation of a concerted communication strategy, it is difficult to see how smaller organisations can hope to compete if required to subsidise their publicity work entirely on their own.

One possibility for reducing the public communication deficit would be for...
the smaller organisations to focus on a two-stage communication strategy: developing their public profile by increasing their presence in the mainstream media. Astute news management can often deliver a level of publicity that exceeds the purchasing power of even the most affluent agencies (McNair 1998: 154).

Aside from this obvious cost benefit, media coverage can deliver other significant advantages. Although it may lack the precision of the niche marketing adopted by some sophisticated agencies, its broad range offers opportunities to address 'unconverted' as well as 'converted' audiences. This can help to widen an organisation's communicative reach, and thereby assist in maintaining the diversity and vitality of its donor base. Significantly, the CAF survey noted a consistent failing of voluntary sector marketing was a tendency to target existing donors, rather than to explore new avenues. This exacerbates problems with falling response rates, market saturation and donor fatigue (ibid.: 7).

Media coverage can also confer status on an organisation and its work, and demonstrate its social value and political effectiveness. This is particularly valuable at a time when concerns about accountability in the sector are growing among the public. This 'halo effect' can also extend to governmental and other institutional elites: enhancing their receptivity to timely sponsorship requests, contract applications or grant bids, and increasing an organisation's political presence and leverage. The success of Greenpeace's campaign in 1995 in forcing Shell UK to rescind its decision to sink the Brent Spar oil-storage platform in the North Sea offers a dramatic illustration of the latter point. Initially, Shell thought it had won the political battle having convinced the British government and many senior scientific experts that the sinking would not lead to serious environmental degradation. In the event, it was forced to back down in the face of a growing storm of media and public outrage that can be attributed directly to the astute news-management activities of Greenpeace (Anderson 1997; Bennie 1998).

But media exposure can be a double-edged sword. Voluntary organisations are acutely dependent on public goodwill, and can therefore be damaged seriously by hostile coverage. But this threat actually increases the reasons why agencies should seek to develop their media relations, for effective news management is not just about publicising politically expedient information, but also limiting and deflecting media interest from damaging or threatening issues (Ericson et al. 1989). In David Hencke's judgement:

Voluntary organisations who economise on press departments are courting trouble. At best they are letting their organisation and its work be ignored by the public. At worst they find themselves in grave difficulties if the media learn about serious problems and their work becomes a local or national scandal as a result of bad publicity.

(quoted in Jones 1984)
There are other factors, however, that may dissuade voluntary agencies from courting the mainstream media too assiduously. The broad reach and relatively indiscriminate nature of media publicity can create pressures and difficulties for voluntary organisations, particularly those with more modest resources at their disposal. Smaller and medium-sized voluntary organisations often have to strike a difficult balance between not being ignored and not being overwhelmed, and there is always a risk that a sudden wave of publicity may increase demands for organisations' services that they are unable to meet (Deacon and Golding 1991: 84-86).

Additionally, media publicity loosens organisations' control over the terms of their public representation. On a basic level, this may lead to occasions where journalists misinterpret and misrepresent an organisation and its aims, perhaps by invoking political and social stereotypes that the organisation itself would want to avoid. Disability rights groups, for example, have long complained about the media's tendency to portray people with disabilities as either 'needy victims or total heroes' (Morrison 1997). On a more fundamental level, there is a danger that excessive concerns with publicity may start to distort an organisation's core values: a process described by Blumler (1989) as 'spurious amplification', where 'inflammatory rhetoric and extravagant demands to make stories more arresting, distort ... what the group stands for' (Blumler 1989: 352).

These broad uncertainties surrounding the benefits and costs of mainstream media coverage are also being accentuated by changes in mainstream media systems. For example, the reappraisal of many of the founding precepts of 'public service' broadcasting in Britain has created worries as to how voluntary groups will fare in any future, diverse and market-led media system (NCVO 1989). More generally, there is the question of how the progressive infiltration of tabloid news values into other media sectors (Franklin 1997; Langer 1997; Bromley 1997) will affect media imaging of voluntary activity. Will journalists' growing predilection for prioritising 'human interest' over 'public interest' accentuate their receptivity to certain arenas of voluntary activity and diminish their interest in others?

These questions about the impact of long-term changes in media structures and values are beyond the remit of this discussion. First, because the processes are still unfolding, and second because there has been surprisingly little concerted investigation into the existing relationship between mainstream media and the voluntary sector. Without a clear idea of current trends in mainstream media representation of the sector, it is difficult to make any systematic appraisal of how things are changing.

The aim of the remainder of this chapter is to try to identify contemporary characteristics of media reporting of voluntary activity, by presenting the findings from research undertaken in the Department of Social Sciences, Loughborough University. The discussion looks in turn at media representations of the sector, the media relations of voluntary organisations and the
perceptions of journalists about the value of voluntary agencies as news sources.

**The voluntary sector in the news**

The analysis of media coverage of voluntary organisations is based on content analysis of all voluntary sector-related news items found in a composite month of local and national broadcast and press coverage: 3,554 separate news and current affairs items were coded.

Four key trends emerged from the analysis of voluntary sector news. The first was that, in most news coverage, charity began at home and stayed at home. Ninety-four per cent of the voluntary organisations identified in the coverage were based in Britain, and 89 per cent were reported conducting their work in a domestic context. This parochialism varied, however, across the different media. National television news, for example, gave greatest coverage to agencies operating internationally (a third of all agencies reported), whereas local press coverage focused almost exclusively on domestic activity (94 per cent).

Second, certain key domains of voluntary activity dominated coverage. 'Health and medicine' was by far the most prominent arena of voluntary activity in news coverage, followed by 'children', 'animals' and the 'environment'. But there were also significant variations in the relative prominence of different arenas across media sectors. For example, whereas 'health and medicine' dominated voluntary sector coverage in the tabloids and the local press, it was less conspicuous in broadcast media and the national broadsheets. On the other hand, 'overseas relief and development' attracted significantly higher levels of coverage in broadcast media than in newspapers. What all sectors shared was a tendency to neglect many important areas of voluntary activity. Coverage of groups specifically representing ethnic minorities, for example, amounted to less than 1 per cent of the voluntary agencies that appeared, despite the growing social significance of the so-called 'black voluntary sector' in Britain (Qaiyoom 1992).

Third, voluntary organisations were far more likely to receive coverage for their deeds rather than their thoughts (see Table 1). There was twice as much coverage of the actions of voluntary agencies (tending to people's needs, fund raising, doing 'good works', etc.) than their comments (raising topics, adjudicating upon the views or actions of others, providing information, etc.). When voluntary voices were highlighted as commentators, their most common role was a 'signalling' one: highlighting issues and concern for wider public debate rather than directly engaging in the cut and thrust of political argument. When organisations did enter the fray, they were most frequently reported in an adversarial manner – being more frequently featured criticising third parties than defending them or commenting dispassionately about them. Here again, there were clear variations across news media. The national tabloid
Table 3.1 Reasons for inclusion for voluntary agencies in news reporting

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reasons for inclusion</th>
<th>All media</th>
<th>National TV news</th>
<th>National radio news</th>
<th>National broadsheets</th>
<th>National tabloids</th>
<th>Local TV news</th>
<th>Local press</th>
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<tr>
<td>• Seeking resources</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>51</td>
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<td>• Other voluntary actions</td>
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<td>11</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>30</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Highlighting issues</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Criticising others</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Information providing</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>11</td>
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<td>11</td>
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<td>5</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Defending/supporting others</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Commenting neutrally on others</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
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<td>(222)</td>
<td>(1151)</td>
<td>(851)</td>
<td>(239)</td>
<td>(3450)</td>
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Note: Numbers may not total 100 in all cases because of rounding up. Data refer to voluntary sector related coverage in news, features or editorial items only.

press and local press (particularly the latter), focused mainly on fund-raising initiatives and other ‘good works’. In contrast, national TV and radio news gave greatest prominence to voluntary agencies as ‘signallers’ and ‘critics’.

Finally, the research found remarkably little negative coverage of voluntary agencies and their work. Table 3.1 shows that issues related to voluntary sector ‘maladministration or inefficiency’ were hardly ever raised, and that organisations were only very occasionally featured in a defensive mode, responding to the criticism of others. As a related exercise, the study tried to establish some measure of the hostility or support articulated within news reporting. This involved noting the number of voluntary sector news items that included any form of commentary about voluntary organisations or issues. ‘Commentary’ was interpreted in very general terms: it could be an explicit editorial evaluation made by a journalist in the item, or the reported judgements of an ‘accessed voice’ (e.g. an acerbic comment from a politician). Furthermore, the comments could either be directed at specific voluntary actors or address issues related to the sector as a whole. Despite this very
inclusive definition, instances of manifest commentary were found in only 4 per cent of the items coded. Most of these were addressed towards specific organisations, and the majority were positive in tone.

Collectively these findings suggest a surprisingly indulgent treatment of voluntary agencies in the news, but also a broad lack of interest in reflective debate about their actions, motives, opinions and functions. This contrasts with media presentation of other non-official news sources. In reports of trade unions, for example, reporting critical questions about mandates and motives tend to be articulated prominently, as are broader discussions about the future of the movement in a changing industrial and political climate.

This combination of indulgence and neglect meant that many of the areas of voluntary activity and important policy debates about the sector remained largely hidden from public view. These absences were most apparent in particular media sectors, such as the local and populist media, which offered appreciably more constrained representations of voluntary activity, whether measured by location, arena or type of activity.

Content analysis, however, may be able to identify broad trends in coverage of the voluntary sector but it is not able to account for them. Such analysis, moreover, can only provide limited information about which organisations received coverage (because of the minimal details provided). To gain perspectives on these matters requires considerable assessment of the media strategies of organisations and the perceptions and practices of the journalists involved in the news production process. It is to these areas that this discussion now turns.

Voluntary organisations as news sources

To gain information on the media-related activities of voluntary organisations, a questionnaire was mailed to a random, stratified, cluster sample of 934 national and local voluntary organisations in Britain (see Deacon (1996)). The survey was conducted in 1993 and achieved a final response rate of 70.5 per cent (655 organisations).

The results established a high degree of media contact among respondents: only 13 per cent had not experienced any media contact in the previous two-year period and most were keen to attract more (only two organisations said they received too much media attention). Contact across different media sectors varied in two ways. First, organisations tended to enjoy most contact with the press, followed by radio and finally television. Second, local coverage far exceeded national reporting. Although these patterns are perhaps predictable -- news-space is more limited in television than in other media, and in national media compared with local media -- it is interesting to note how the publicity efforts of organisations mirrored this distribution of coverage. Whereas 62 per cent of organisations who had received press coverage said that they tended to initiate contact with the press, this proportion fell to 44 per cent among those who had received television exposure.
The survey also asked organisations to identify their motives for seeking media attention which were assigned to one of three broad headings. Use of the media to attract funds, grants and volunteers was categorised as 'resource motives'. Attempts to raise the public profile of an organisation, whether among supporters, the public or other political institutions were categorised as 'profile motives'. 'Issue motives' concerned those occasions when attempts were made to use the media to raise issues for broader public or political discussion. Although there is a degree of overlap between these categories, they are sufficiently distinctive to warrant their comparison. 'Resource motives' are the most inward looking and instrumental of all, being tightly orientated around the material needs of an organisation. 'Profile motives' are still self regarding, but have a certain external orientation, in that they are concerned with establishing the credentials of the organisation in the eyes of others. 'Issue motives' are the most outward looking and 'political' (in the broadest sense of the word), as they represent a conscious intention to use publicity to influence the actions and perceptions of others in ways that do not specifically focus around the organisation itself. Overall, the survey found that although issue, resource and profile motives were regularly cited by a wide range of organisations, profile motives were the most consistently emphasised.

When these general findings were disaggregated, clear structural divisions emerged in the media and publicity activities. The better resourced organisations — as measured by annual budget, availability of paid staff, and range of activity (national rather than local) — reported the most media contact and appeared in more diverse media contexts. This greater presence can undoubtedly be explained in part by their significantly greater investment and professionalism in public communication activities. These organisations were by far the most likely to have designated media officers, to monitor media output, to distribute news releases and to produce other promotional material.

The findings also signalled, however, that this predictable relationship between economic power and media exposure is tempered by other factors. First, the survey assessed the regularity with which the organisation had formal contact with politicians and policy makers in government. It has been suggested that media exposure may be an indication of an organisation's political exclusion from the corridors of power (e.g. Rose 1989: 227), but this survey found that organisations that reported most regular parliamentary and central government contact also indicated the highest levels of media contact. When 'governmental proximity' was controlled, moreover, resourcing factors no longer remained consistent predictors of media contact. For example, organisations with paid staff who had the most regular central government contact were not significantly more likely to have gained media exposure than groups dependent on volunteers who had equivalent contact. In contrast, 'governmental proximity' retained a statistically significant link with media contact, even when the availability of paid employees remained constant.

Second, 'campaign-focused' organisations (as distinct from those principally
Construction of voluntary sector news

Concerned with 'caring/service/advice', 'self help' and 'other functions') reported most contact across all media sectors and were more likely to have been featured as 'commentators' in hard news coverage. But they were no more professionalised than other organisations in their communication work, spent no more on publicity activities and only shared a broad enthusiasm for media attention. Where they did differ was in the motives they ascribed to their publicity seeking via the media. These proved to be significantly more externally orientated (i.e. 'issue' based). The same principle applied to the better-resourced, professionalised organisations, who also displayed consistently broader communicative agendas than smaller organisations. But multivariate analysis showed that 'organisational resources' and 'campaign-orientation' had independently significant links with media contact.

The fact that media contact cannot be exclusively explained by financial factors highlights the need to attend to another element in the generation of voluntary sector news: the mediating role of news professionals. As Bruck (1992: 142) rightly explains:

In news analysis, we need to make the analytical separation between the discourses the media produce and the discourses they use as material to build on, to process and deliver. We need to be interested in the structures of transformation.

Let us now consider the role of the mediators.

Newsroom perspectives

To gain insights into journalists' perspectives thirty-eight semi-structured interviews were conducted with purposively selected national and local news professionals. The interviews inquired about their exchange relationships with voluntary organisations, and their perceptions of the newsworthiness and credibility of this disparate range of sources.

Being good at giving news

There are some charities that really have got no more idea than the man in the moon of how to communicate with the media.

(National TV journalist)

Most journalists said they were having increasing contact with voluntary organisations in their work, but there were clear differences between local and national news professionals in their perception of the inherent newsworthiness of voluntary sector activity. Whilst national journalists paid lip service to the value and integrity of the sector, they saw it as having far less intrinsic news value than many other 'leadership arenas' (Seymour-Ure 1987), such as...
government, political parties and the trade union movement. In the local media, voluntary activity was more highly valued in its own right, as local 'good citizenship' was seen both as a reliable column filler for a quiet news day, and as a useful means for locating and 'localising' a programme or paper within its target region.

Despite this distinction and the positive comments all journalists made about the social contribution of voluntary organisations, most were highly antagonistic to the idea that voluntary organisations should receive special treatment in news reporting. In their view, it is legitimate to expect voluntary organisations to compete for their attention, by providing stories that recognised the demands and constraints of the news-selection process. Furthermore, many journalists criticised the inability of many voluntary agencies to provide information efficiently and to package it in 'interesting' ways. As one specialist social affairs correspondent complained:

"The sector as a whole is very naive in what it thinks the press can do for it, and what it can do for the press... Though I do get lots of approaches from smaller charities, they uniformly tend to be along the lines of 'Can you give us a write-up for this or that?' Rather than by trying to stimulate our interest by saying 'We are doing this and the reason you might be interested is because this reflects a general issue concerning a sector in society'. And it's very heartening but very rare that I get an approach from a charity who are offering an idea that is going to work.'

Within this formulation, media prominence is seen as a measure of organisational competence, and if the media ignores organisations, it is because of their failure to respond to predictable market requirements. While not denying this is an important aspect, the suggestion made by several journalists that this is the sole mechanism that determines media presence is somewhat disingenuous, not least because it conveniently obscures the active and significant intervention made by journalists themselves in filtering, reworking and appraising media messages. Journalists do not just passively relay information, they need to translate it into news. Sometimes this simply involves the selective presentation of material that has already been 'pre-mediated' into an acceptable news account by news sources (Ericson et al. 1989: 6), at other times it involves actively reworking source material into new forms. Both tasks involve active judgements, and require the invocation of professional values to guide the editorial decision-making.

**News values and the voluntary sector**

Journalists repeatedly emphasised two important criteria that influenced whether a voluntary agency receives coverage. These were 'topicality' and 'generality'. 'Topicality' was the main criterion to test the value of voluntary sector information in 'hard news' terms (i.e. as 'information people should have to be
informed citizens' (Tuchman 1972: 114). Because the sector was not identified by the national media, in particular, as a significant leadership arena in its own right, it had to conform to news agendas determined by other powerful agencies and events. One consequence of this was that charities or voluntary organisations working in areas that became topical in the news agendas might suddenly find the media very receptive to their views and, indeed, be approached by journalists. Groups working in areas that are absent or marginalised from the mainstream news agenda, however, would find journalists far less receptive.

The second criterion was that of 'generality', reflecting journalists' interest in the broad relevance of a story. This was more of a 'soft news' test (i.e. dealing with 'human foibles and "the texture of human life''' (ibid.)). Although journalists, as mass communicators, can only ever imperfectly know their audience, their work is driven by a concern that they are talking to as wide a number of its constituents as possible, and in meaningful terms. This fixation with the general applicability of news had two implications for the reporting of voluntary activity.

First, it created a clear preference on the part of national journalists for those organisations with strong nationwide support. Second, it created a preference for those organisations that dealt with issues of a general rather than minority interest, and of an unproblematic and non-contentious nature. This explains the predilection for 'cuddly charities' in news reporting (Hunt 1993): organisations that, as one broadsheet journalist put it, provide 'pictures of dogs ... pictures of donkeys ... stories about new units in hospitals ... stories about new ways of helping sick children'. It also helps to account for the conspicuous absence of ethnic minority organisations from mainstream news reporting, particularly in the most popular media (who are most dependent upon achieving mass circulation). As one tabloid journalist candidly admitted,

> If it's something that affects a minority of the population then it is by definition a minority of our readership, and therefore it's, by definition, not going to get in the paper.

These news value-judgements demonstrate that media presence is not solely determined by the ability to deliver information regularly and coherently to news desks. The interviews also revealed, however, another range of judgements that guide news selection in this area. These concern journalists' perceptions of the credibility of different organisations.

*Fair comments and half-truths: the hierarchy of voluntary sector credibility*

In producing news, journalists seek to report the views and activities of 'authorised knowers' (Ericson *et al.* 1987), individuals or institutions who are seen to have some claim to speak authoritatively on public issues, because of their
Social policy, the media and misrepresentation

social, political or economic status. In the case of the voluntary sector, the issue of authoritativeness is less clear cut than it is with other sources. After all, anybody can set up a pressure group or a charity, and make inflated claims for their work.

Journalists made very clear distinctions when assessing the credibility of voluntary agencies, and these judgements had a significant influence on how and whether they were reported. Furthermore, they operated as a powerful filtering mechanism, which led to the automatic exclusion of voluntary agencies that were seen to lack credibility. This helps explain the remarkably uncritical coverage of voluntary groups in media coverage. In most cases a 'critique by exclusion' operated in which organisations deemed to have questionable motives or dubious competence were ignored rather than castigated: their lack of intrinsic news status militating against any sustained media scrutiny.

The issue of credibility also influenced those occasions when voluntary agencies were invited to comment on issues in the news. Journalists often welcomed the partiality of organisations who were prepared to enter the political fray, and make critical interventions on broader matters of public policy. Indeed, several journalists indicated that they increasingly relied upon certain voluntary agencies as a source of controversial comment, particularly in relation to government policy. This would partly explain the greater media prominence of campaign focused organisations, who were most orientated to external debate and therefore most likely to provide the controversial newsbites upon which mainstream media so centrally depend.

Journalists made clear distinctions concerning which organisations' views could be taken on their merits, which required further corroboration or balancing, and which should be completely ignored. On this point, many news professionals drew sharp distinctions between campaign orientated pressure groups and other types of voluntary and charitable agencies, particularly service providers. As one journalist explained, a pressure group 'is not sort of helping people in the way that a charity does ... [Is not] a worthy cause which would make you think "yes!" Pressure groups were seen to lack the involvement and support of an identifiable client group, which, in the journalists' eyes, lent authority to the views and opinions of those organisations that had such a base:

Because of their breadth of experience and because they're in touch all the time with the sort of problem with which they're dealing, that sorts of transcends their particular thrust.

(National TV journalist)

For this reason, campaign orientated groups were considered more useful as 'advocates' rather than 'arbiters' (Deacon and Golding 1994): a source of controversial reaction, rather than informed comment. By contrast, the views of caring and service providing organisations were often given greater credence,
because they were seen to be based on practical experience rather than political opinions. By the same token, the greater the range and representativeness of an organisation, the more authority was attributed to its views, because this increased the breadth of interests it could claim to represent. Official links with, and recognition by, government also served to enhance estimations of an organisations' broader credibility.

Conclusion

This chapter has examined why issues related to public communication are gaining in importance for the voluntary sector in Britain. In particular, it has considered whether the mainstream media are accentuating or reducing divisions which may have a significant impact on the future financial viability and political influence of voluntary organisations.

The three-way analysis of media representations, organisations' media publicity strategies and the interventions of news professionals suggests that mainstream coverage tends to contribute to mainstreaming effects within the sector. News reporting offers a decidedly restricted view of voluntarism: marginalising contentious, minority or non-photogenic arenas, presenting organisations in an indulgent but largely anodyne and descriptive context, and engaging in little reflexive debate about the strategic role and needs of the sector. The survey of voluntary organisations' media strategies confirms a strong linkage between media access and economic power, while the interviews with journalists suggest that audience considerations and professional caution tend to encourage journalists to prioritise big charity over little charity, and established voices over emerging voices.

Additionally, the research illustrates how different factors combine to fashion patterns of inclusion and exclusion. The predominant portrayal of voluntary organisations as 'doing good works' in a 'soft news' context, for example, rather than as engaged political actors in a 'hard news' setting, is partly bound up with journalists' uncertainties about the authoritativeness of many voluntary agencies as commentators on public matters, but also reflects the reticence or inability of many voluntary agencies to engage consistently with the media in this potentially more controversial context. Furthermore, the research shows that newsworthiness is not just determined by the efficient distribution of publicity, but also the nature of the messages being produced. Smaller organisations, for example, appeared least able to invest in formal press and publicity work and prosecuted the most instrumental and limited communicative agendas. This combination inhibited their appeal to news professionals, who repeatedly criticised the failure of many voluntary agencies to extrapolate their messages effectively and to stress their broader significance.

This latter point highlights an essential problem for the suggestion that mainstream media coverage can somehow compensate for growing divisions in public communication paid for and initiated by organisations themselves.
Social policy, the media and misrepresentation

Ironically, by seeking to use media publicity for instrumental purposes (fund-raising, volunteer recruitment, etc.), organisations inadvertently prepare the basis for their exclusion.

As a final point, it is important to acknowledge that these are tendencies rather than deterministic trends. The research also shows that strategic actions and effective political networking can compensate for limited financial resources and enable smaller organisations to win considerable media exposure. But there are limits on how far agencies are in control of their own media destiny. Astute media-centred campaigning may gain organisations prominence as 'advocates' of a particular viewpoint or interest group, but it cannot enable them to win status as 'arbiters' in news. This role is conferred by the news professionals and rests on their judgements about the political status and cultural capital of specific organisations. And in this respect, as in many others, the well resourced, the widely known and the well connected enjoy conspicuous and considerable advantages.

Notes

1 This media analysis is based on research funded by the ESRC (grant reference R000233193). In general the discussion draws on continuing collaborative research with Beth Walker, Peter Golding, Wendy Monk and Natalie Fenton in the Department of Social Sciences, Loughborough University.

2 Some estimates calculate a broader definition of voluntarism would increase the total to 350,000 organisations for England and Wales.

3 Sampling began on Monday 26 October 1992 and from that date every eighth day was sampled until 30 May 1993. All national daily and Sunday newspapers for each sample day were analysed, as were all daily and weekly newspapers published and distributed in four selected local regions: Norfolk, South Yorkshire, Hampshire and West Midlands. Thirty-three newspapers were coded in all. For the national broadcast sample, flagship news programmes from terrestrial channels were analysed (BBC1 9 p.m. news, ITN News at Ten, BBC2 Newsnight, C4 News, BBC Radio 4 World at One, BBC Radio 4 6 p.m. News, BBC Radio 1 News 92/3'). The local television sample comprised the main early evening regional BBC and ITV news programmes broadcast in each of the local sample areas, on each of the sample weekdays. An item was treated as 'voluntary sector-related' if it mentioned any organisation that was (1) non-profit making, (2) non-statutory, (3) non-party political, (4) not affiliated to a professional group and (5) had a formalised organisational structure.

4 The 'highlighting issues' category was used where a voluntary actor was featured requesting that 'something must be done' but did not direct criticisms towards, or make demands upon, specific institutions or individuals.

5 Of course, this is not to suggest that there is a complete absence of debate about the strategic role and needs of the sector in media reporting. It is noticeable, however, that what debate there is tends to be concentrated in specific public policy sections in 'up-market' broadsheets, such as the 'Society' section of the Guardian.

6 These divisions were even more stark than those exposed in the CAF survey of public communication. This is because the current survey sample included a more diverse range of voluntary organisations whereas the CAF study concentrated solely on charities with a total income of £300,000 or above [ibid.: 9].
7 For example intermediary organisations and grant making trusts.
8 Fifteen worked in the national media in Britain and twenty-three in local and regional media. A diverse range of media professionals was sampled across all media sectors: news editors, general reporters, specialist correspondents, producers and programme researchers.
9 This principle applied to the local media as much as the national media. The local media were concerned to address their local communities in their entirety, rather than particular sections.

References
Research Report, Loughborough: Department of Social Sciences, Loughborough University.
The Communication Environment of the Social Sciences

The purpose of this chapter and the two that follow is to examine the main factors that combine to produce the trends in media representation of the social sciences previously identified. This task requires separate consideration of three related areas. Obviously, there is a need to look at the practices and values of media professionals, to see how these affect the take-up and evaluation of social scientific knowledge. There is also a need to examine the strategies and perceptions of the social scientists themselves, to consider how their actions and beliefs may influence the kind of coverage they receive. Finally, it is important to examine the political and institutional context within which these activities take place. We term this context the 'communication environment' of the social sciences.

It is this environment that is discussed here and is an important element in developing an adequately news-source-orientated perspective of news production in this topic area (see Chapter I). We place this discussion first, mainly because it is a factor behind the construction of media discourses that tends to be neglected in most of the existing literature on science and the media. This is an unfortunate omission, for scientists, and in particular social scientists, do not operate in a political vacuum. As professionals working within public and private institutions they inevitably encounter a range of pressures and expectations that can have implications for their work practices and by extension their communication strategies and concerns. Additionally, as we discuss below, these demands do not remain constant over time. Indeed, for a range of reasons these pressures can be seen to be increasing.

This chapter focuses on the current political and economic situation relating to the social sciences in Britain. We make no apologies for this, as comparisons between our media analysis and other national studies clearly suggest there are dangers in generalizing trends from one national context to others, at least regarding the extent of social science coverage. Furthermore, the structure and rationality of particular communication environments are themselves framed by specific political and economic factors, such as the political and intellectual dispositions of government, the distribution and sustainability of public expenditure levels, and the historical configuration of research and teaching agencies. However, in making this point, we would also stress that many of the broader trends highlighted in this discussion will also resonate with other national contexts, as the
roots of many of these broad transformations are by no means unique to Britain.

The substantive discussion of this chapter divides into two sections, examining respectively the communication concerns of institutions that fund social science research and those that host research. We are conscious that it is not tenable to sustain an absolute distinction between institutions on this basis, as some funding agencies also employ their own researchers, just as several host institutions can be said to fund research, whether simply by providing employees with the material, technological and temporal means for developing research work, or by actually providing research moneys for particular projects. Nevertheless, despite these areas of common purposes, we maintain it is legitimate to treat funders and hosts separately. Firstly, because however much their work may converge at a subsidiary level, their primary functions are very distinctive. Secondly, because of this primary difference, the nature of their contact with social scientists, and thereby their potential influence, is likely to be different. In the majority of cases the influence of funding sources will tend to be transient and episodic, as it can only be directly exercised when formal contractual relationships exist and most typically these are short term rather than long term in nature. In contrast, host institutions have long-standing relationships with the social scientists they employ, and for this reason their influence may operate in different ways.

The discussion of the communication needs and aspirations of funding and host institutions in this chapter draws on a range of primary and secondary research material. In conjunction with the analysis of a range of secondary literature, these sections draw on evidence from 27 semi-structured interviews with senior managers and marketing personnel from key institutions in this communication environment. Before this detail is presented it is necessary to first sketch out the broader political climate within which these institutions operate, to understand the constraints governing their strategies and motives.

The Social Sciences in a Cold Climate

During the 1960s the social sciences in Britain experienced an unprecedented period of expansion, initially in the development of higher education teaching programmes and then an exponential growth in funded research (Smith, 1987: 62). The government was the key financier of this expansion, as it sought to widen access to higher education and to use insights derived from research to enhance and rationalize policy making and administration. This growth mirrored the expanding influence of the social sciences in other European and North American countries during the same period. However, the increased pedagogic and political influence of the social sciences did not continue for long, and by the early 1980s the 'expansionist optimism' evident in the 1960s (Bulmer, 1987: 346) was replaced by far
The communication environment

more pessimistic prognoses, with many expressing fears about the intellectual and material future of the social sciences in the face of an increasingly hostile set of conditions.

The first of these related to serious pecuniary pressures. From the mid-1970s successive British governments sought to rein back all forms of public expenditure. This had inevitable implications for the resourcing of both teaching and research in the social sciences, which are crucially dependent on public funding. These economic pressures were accentuated by political difficulties. Whereas initially the drive to reduce public spending was forced by macro-economic events beyond governmental control, pragmatic necessity was soon transformed into a political virtue with the election of a new Conservative government headed by Margaret Thatcher. The core values of this new regime - rooted in individualism, free market values and an entrenched antipathy to corporatism and the welfare state - quickly undermined the foundations of the shared culture that had started to emerge between policy makers and certain sections of the social scientific community. As Webb (1992: 116) explains:

At least five factors came together at that time: the underlying mistrust of the intellectual and academic enterprise embedded in British culture; an abhorrence of unproductive public expenditure and of public expenditure per se; a ground-swell of criticism of the apparently unaccountable and self-serving professions (especially in the public services); the populist, anti-establishment instincts of Thatcherism; and a drive to 'modernize' Britain's hide-bound and inefficient institutions which also lay at the heart of the Thatcher enterprise. Academics in general, but universities in particular, fell foul of each of these currents in political life.

Again, this situation was not unique to Britain, as similar and coincidental situations occurred in other countries, particularly the USA following the election of President Reagan. If this new political climate in Britain was unpromising for academics in general, it proved particularly hostile for social scientists, who were often identified as bastions of the social and political values that the Thatcher administration was seeking to overthrow. As Bulmer commented at the height of this crisis:

the political animosity to social science among members of the Thatcher and Reagan circles has been to some extent misinterpreted. There is less antipathy to social science as such so much as viewing economic and social phenomena within a different frame. . . . For followers of Thatcher and Reagan, the question is not: social science or no social science? but: what kind of social science? This point has been insufficiently appreciated in the social science community. (1987: 347–8)

The most obvious example of established bases of social scientific expertise clashing with the ascendant values of the New Right in the early 1980s was in the field of economics, where an established Keynesian orthodoxy in academia jarred with the new monetarist values driving government policy (Flather, 1987: 354). But there were several other subject areas where disjunctions were evident, ranging from housing policy to medical sociology, and from poverty to criminology (see Smith, 1987: 69–75). In the view of
one of the most influential political figures in the new Thatcherite govern­
ment, Sir Keith Joseph, most of the social sciences were permeated with
an implicit 'statism' to which he was adamantly opposed (Joseph and
Sumption, 1979).

Perhaps not surprisingly, the period of 'most acute conflict in Britain
occurred during the early phases of Margaret Thatcher's tenure, when her
administration's evangelical zeal was most pre-eminent. Since then the
social sciences have, if not exactly gained ground, then at least consolidated
their position more strongly than seemed possible at the start of the 1980s
(Webb, 1992). The roots of this resilience relate to several factors, in
particular the resistance of the political institutions to radical reform,
pockets of resistance within the system of government, and the absence of a
coherent governmental stance on social research. As Bulmer explains:

the diffuse, pluralist and negotiated character of decision-making in industrial
societies means that it is not simply a matter of Prime Ministers, Presidents or
cabinet members setting down a line to follow. . . . There was a general hostility,
in government] to the social sciences and social research, with twinges of
philistinism, but the situation varied from department to department. (1987: 349)

Certainly, central government remains the most significant funder and
client of social scientific research in Britain.

Nevertheless, if various doomsday scenarios predicted by some during
the 1980s have not been realized, as the discussion that follows reveals, the
social sciences in Britain remain in a distincty uncertain financial and
political environment. And if government hostility to the social sciences has
become tempered following the deposition of Margaret Thatcher and the
derailing of the monetarist project, the pull of conviction politics remain
strong, and the influence of measured analysis uncertain (see Golding,

With this political context in mind, the discussion now turns to the
central aim of this chapter: to map the key features of the communication
environment of the social sciences in Britain. It begins by comparing the
perspective of research funders regarding communication and publicity
matters.

Research Funding Agencies

There are many potential sources of funding for social scientific research in
the UK, both national and international, and from public and private
sectors. As we do not have the space here to discuss the views of each of
these myriad sources regarding communication and publicity issues, we
concentrate on the three principal commissioners of direct research: central
government departments, research councils and philanthropic foundations.
To understand properly the views and practices of these different types of
funding source regarding communication and dissemination issues, it is
necessary first to clarify their distinct functions and their reasons for
funding research. For as we demonstrate below, there are clear links between these institutional factors and communication strategies and expectations.

Central Government

Over the last 40 years British government has developed a considerable appetite for social scientific research, whether for monitoring economic and social trends, investigating needs, appraising policy implications, reviewing services or rationalizing political decision making. At present various tiers of government both employ their own research staff and contract external agencies to conduct work on their behalf. The mix of internal and external research activity tends to vary across levels and departments of government, but collectively the executive provides a considerable amount of financial support for social scientific research, especially at national level. In 1992 UK central government departments spent £150 million on social research and development (Cabinet Office, 1992).

With central government funding, the research agenda is determined by the specific administrative and political concerns of the funding department. As one senior source put it:

[Government research] is very much geared to the needs of the Department and information that's useful in terms of developing or evaluating policy. So a lot of things that are interesting on the research agenda in the area of poverty or social security, for example, we wouldn't commission. Because although they're interesting, they're not directly useful. And our research is very focused and I think academics, in particular, are sometimes inclined to think that the focus is a bit too narrow, and I sometimes think that they're right. (Director of research, central government department)

This highly focused and utilitarian approach to research clearly influences these sources' views of communication and dissemination issues. All the senior research directors we interviewed stated that they saw media or publicity issues as only peripherally relevant to their work. In their view, their main communicative task is to disseminate information effectively within the governmental system, and that this process can even be hindered by more diffuse publicity activities:

I don't see [the media] as a major priority. I think the major function of government funded research is that it informs the policy process. And just because it doesn't get any media coverage doesn't mean it's being ignored. There will often have been a lot of discussion internally. And I think sometimes as far as researchers go, media coverage can sometimes be counter productive in terms of the amount of time that's spent on it internally. It's a bit like: these people have caused us trouble because there's been lots of publicity so we're dealing with that, so we're not thinking about the report. (Research director, government department)

The point I would like to make very strongly is that I think one of the main purposes of government-funded research which distinguishes it from other funding is that it must be there to be useful to government, otherwise there is no point in doing it. And being useful to government means that government itself is
Mediating social science

aware of it and uses it. And therefore we mustn’t be so busily rushing off round the world giving our presentations to the world and academia etc. that we are neglecting the policy customers within our department. (Research director, government department)

All these government representatives recognized that their departments’ indifference to broader publicity issues often conflicted with the professional aspirations of their research contractors and general democratic ideals of open government. Consequently, for both of these reasons, they claimed that they rarely, if ever, invoked their legal powers to obstruct the publication of research findings, and claimed they were beginning to give some thought to improving their external dissemination strategies.³ They also denied accusations that these powers are used cynically to suppress politically inconvenient research findings. However, these claims do not contradict the general point about their essential indifference towards publicity and media matters: not obstructing publication is not the same thing as actively promoting research dissemination:

We’ve tended to be a bit laid back, really. We accepted the report and used the report for what we wanted internally and left them to go and publish and get any media attention or whatever it happens to be. (Research director, government department)

I think it is fairly free, although I think sometimes contractors think otherwise. It’s partly because they’re inevitably out to get as much publicity as possible and make themselves a reputation. And you can’t blame them for that. . . . I reckon that in nearly all cases that I’ve ever come across where I’ve been personally involved the suppression has been about dire quality. Which the individual concerned cannot face up to. . . . We’ve got something on mortgage arrears now and repossessions, which isn’t particularly good news. And I’m sure the media will pick it up and say we’ve got all these repossessions. But the fact of the matter is that we all think it is a bloody good piece of work and not one single bit of it will get changed or suppressed. (Research director, government department)

Ministers get to know fairly sharpish when they come here that there is a long tradition of publication. And if they were to suddenly stop publishing they would find they were having quite a lot of media attention. . . . I think in terms of open government the more open coverage we have of things, the more open debate, the healthier the society. So I think we do want media coverage, but of course you can’t then control what they say. (Research director, government department)

Several interviewees claimed there were clear interdepartmental differences in the willingness to communicate research findings more broadly, particularly via the mainstream news media. However, these claims are not supported by an analysis of the total number of official news releases distributed by different government departments over a one-year period (see Table 3.1). For although there are marked variations in the total number of news releases distributed by each department, which implies different levels in media proactivity, these differences are not mirrored by significant variations in the number of news releases focused on the dissemination of social science research information. None of the four departments sampled here released more than 30 such news releases throughout 1996.
Table 3.1 News releases disseminated by government departments January-December 1996

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Department</th>
<th>Total number of national news releases (1996)</th>
<th>Total number of news releases focusing on the dissemination of research-based information</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Home Office</td>
<td>330</td>
<td>21 (6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Department of Social Security</td>
<td>203</td>
<td>29 (14%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Department of Education and Employment</td>
<td>429</td>
<td>26 (6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Department of Environment</td>
<td>531</td>
<td>29 (5%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: http://www.coi.gov.uk/coi

Research Councils

The other major form of central government support for scientific research is the various research councils that operate semi-independently. As a result of recent government restructuring there are now six research councils. Although several of these fund social scientific research, in this chapter we focus on the principal funding agency for this type of research in the UK: the Economic and Social Research Council, which in 1995 committed £35 million for conducting research, funding studentships and supplying resources across various social science disciplines.

Historically, the ESRC, in its former guise as the Social Science Research Council, had the strongest links with academic institutions, and was the principal source of funding for what could be described as ‘basic research’ (i.e., research ‘primarily concerned with the advancement of knowledge, clearly not designed to any specific aim or application’: Loder and Fry, 1992: 100) as opposed to either ‘applied research’ or ‘strategic research’ (‘directed primarily toward practical aims and objectives’ or ‘speculative but with clear potential for application’: ibid.). As such it was far less prescriptive than other funding sources in defining the research agenda or in compelling work to demonstrate applied relevance beyond academia.

This situation changed in the early 1980s following a government review of the funding and future of the SSRC initiated by Sir Keith Joseph, the intellectual guru of the New Right, and then Secretary of State for Education. Although a successful rearguard action prevented abolition (see Flather, 1987), the retitling of the SSRC as the Economic and Social Research Council in 1985 heralded a sea change in the purpose and direction of the Council (Golding, 1994) in which the emphasis on applied and strategic research has increased at the expense of basic research. This shift was given further impetus with the publication of a government White Paper on the role of scientific research and the research councils in 1993 (Office of Science and Technology, 1993). In 1994 the Council produced a mission statement that identified the enhancement of ‘economic competitiveness, the effectiveness of public services and public policy, and the
quality of life' as being central to its role (ESRC, 1994: 2). Soon afterwards nine thematic priorities were defined which were intended to increase the material value of this research to so-called 'user communities' beyond the academic sector.⁴ There was also an increased emphasis on funding research in specific 'research programmes', where researchers submit bids in topic areas designated by the Council. Although the traditional 'Research Grants Scheme' still exists, in which researchers can seek funding for work in areas they themselves choose, the new application procedures for this scheme also require that the applied relevance of proposed research is convincingly demonstrated.

Despite the increasingly practical focus of the Council's mission, this pragmatism is still different from the instrumentalism that structures most directly funded government research. Whereas the latter primarily involves seeking answers to clearly defined and predetermined questions, the thematizing and prioritizing of ESRC-funded research is not intended to remove the exploratory role of research.⁵ The extent to which the more focused research priorities of the Council are commensurate with the pursuit of genuine innovation and exploration in research has been the subject of considerable debate, but the current ESRC research agenda does not yet display the focused utilitarianism of directly government funded research (see Loder and Fry, 1992: 103-5).

This distinctive purpose in turn produces a markedly different perspective on publicity and media issues. In particular, the revision of the Council's priorities since 1993 has put communication issues right at the forefront of its strategic planning in several ways. Firstly, the Council's five-year corporate plan emphasizes its requirement that all research centres, programmes and individual project holders have 'strategies for communicating their research findings within, but particularly beyond, the academic community' as an 'essential component of knowledge and skills transfer to the non-academic community' (ESRC, 1994: 2). Secondly, publication and dissemination activities have become an important performance indicator in appraisals of research quality and success. Thirdly, the media have been identified as playing a vital role in achieving these objectives. For example, in a national press article the Council's chief executive urged social scientists to 'stand up and be quoted' and to meet the media challenge, because 'The use of social science research in all its various forms is based on a partnership between researchers and non-academic users in which both sides are fully engaged. . . . As Mikhail Gorbachev once said in another context, "If not us, who? If not now, when?"' (Amann, 1996). To facilitate greater interaction between researchers and the media, the Council has staged a series of workshops dedicated to media and presentation training, and distributes formal guidelines to all grant holders about how best to manage media relations and organize dissemination activity (ESRC, 1994b).

This growing interest in the role of the media has also produced a greater sensitivity to the nature of media coverage of research activity and the
The communication environment

Council has made considerable and increasing investments in monitoring the details and trends in this area. We fund market research on journalists for example, and we do it on a regular basis, about how they use research. We also do benchmarking studies with other outfits. We also monitor what, for example, universities get in terms of coverage, major institutes. We analyse press coverage ourselves. We also do market research on the business community. What sorts of information they use. We do that for government as well. Most of that has happened in the last year [1994-5].

We've just initiated a scheme which is the reverse, which is getting key journalists into academia, which is the idea of visiting journalists... So there's a lot of bridge building that's going on. (ESRC representative)

Although the principal purpose of these exercises is to develop more effective strategies for communicating beyond academia, this interest in mainstream media is also driven by more vested 'image related' considerations. At a time when all public agencies have come under increased economic pressure and public scrutiny, the Council recognizes the political importance of establishing and protecting its prestige and reputation. In particular, these concerns have gained urgency in the context of research council restructuring, and the need for the Council to demonstrate its role and value as part of the overall science community. Towards this end it has developed a 'corporate communication programme' promoting the role of the ESRC and social science research (ESRC, 1996: 2) and requires all grant holders to acknowledge ESRC support in their research literature and to give its external relations division advance notice and sight of any news releases:

It's nice to have ESRC funding acknowledged. Purely because the sort of people that read [the media] are primarily users, but also our paymasters. And therefore it's important. (ESRC representative)

Philanthropic Foundations

Although the statutory sector is the main source of support for social science research in Britain, the voluntary sector also plays a very important role, particularly via various philanthropic foundations. While some of these foundations just have an occasional relationship with researchers – funding specific projects that relate to particular policy issues and objectives – others adopt a more strategic approach, perceiving research to be of pivotal importance to their broader mission of furthering the common good. For example, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation spent £12.6 million on social research and development between 1994 and 1995 (Joseph Rowntree Trust, 1995/6: 9) and the Nuffield Foundation committed £2 million to 'Social Research and Innovation' in 1995 (Nuffield Foundation, 1995: 2).

As with government departments, and to a lesser extent the ESRC, many of these foundations are concerned with the issue of practical policy relevance when funding research activity. But the centrality of this concern varies somewhat according to the type of foundation. Leat (1992) suggests
that there are three modes of operation for grant-giving charities in the UK — as 'grant givers', 'investors' and 'collaborative entrepreneurs' — and that these differences have implications both for the funding relationship between grant providers and recipients, and for the concerns about the applied relevance of the research. Foundations that adopt the first two roles tend to have less rigidly thematized funding policies (although some are changing their position on this), tend to be less concerned with specific policy objectives in the research they commission, and generally employ a more 'hands off' approach to the research they support. In contrast, 'collaborative entrepreneurs' are more focused in their research agenda and more likely to want to act in partnership with researchers, rather than to devolve responsibility completely. Crucially, although the latter share a general concern to support only research of genuine merit, their programmes are rooted in social advocacy, rather than the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake, facilitating wealth creation, increasing economic competitiveness, or easing the administrative wheels of government (see Thomas, 1987: 56):

Our mission is to change policies and practices. It is not to contribute to the greater sum of knowledge in the world. So we have a very precise objective and if we are to change policies and practices we can't do it by just becoming better informed ourselves, or even to make sure the academic world is becoming better informed. You've got to take a horse to water and bury its head in it and kick it and do various things to try and get people to take some notice. . . . If we felt there was a better way of changing policies and practices we would take the £6 million a year from the research community and we'd do it a different way. (Director of a philanthropic foundation (collaborative entrepreneur))

Once again, these differences produce manifest differences in dissemination activities and attitudes to publicity. On the one hand, 'collaborative entrepreneurs' have long tended to place great importance on gaining broad publicity for their research (e.g. Heady, 1977), and have developed sophisticated mechanisms for communicating findings to policy makers, practitioners, academics and the news media:

We're extremely keen on the dissemination aspects of each completed piece of work. We spend a further £600,000 a year purely on publicity and the dissemination of the work. But the most straightforward way we do that is to put out an interim press release, a summary of the findings from each piece of work. You'll have them around. They come in series that reflect our priorities. (Director of a philanthropic foundation (collaborative entrepreneur))

On the other hand, 'grant-giving' and 'investing' foundations tend to be less structured in this regard, seeing publicity matters as being only incidentally, if potentially, important:

We don't spend time agonizing over publicity. I think that's rather important. . . . It doesn't bother us particularly, as long as the projects are valuable and effective in whatever terms we evaluate them by. . . . Our trustees would like to do things better and have done better, whether or not the Daily Express or the FT or whatever thinks it's a good idea. (Director of a philanthropic foundation (grant giving))
As a partial qualification of this point, it was also evident from the inter­
views that some of the grant giving and investing foundations are starting
in this area, largely as a consequence of witnessing
the success of several more proactive foundations in influencing public
debate through concerted and professionalized publicity activity:

We are conscious we ought to do more about encouraging researchers to dis­
seminate their work more effectively and a lot are very bad at it. . . . The trusts
between them do a great range of subjects and we might have two or three
projects or more in the field of health and homelessness or providing
accommodation to people who are HIV positive. . . . And I think therefore we
do have, unconsciously if you like, the ability to perform a sort of networking
function, and we are beginning to come to the view that, in a low-profile way,
from the trusts’ point of view, but in a high-profile way from the subject, one
could periodically, for instance, produce booklets which have a kind of visual and
editorial continuity about them. But no more than that: on services for
disadvantaged groups, mentally ill or whatever, I think that would be quite a
useful thing to do. (Research director, philanthropic foundation (grant giving))

One area in which all the foundations we interviewed appeared to differ
significantly from the ESRC was the matter of their own media citation
and their general interest in their own image maintenance. Most seemed far
less concerned with the nature and regularity of their identification in
coverage than the Council. This is not to say they are oblivious to these
issues, nor that they would not move to defend their reputation in the event
of negative coverage, but rather that they place less emphasis on
establishing an autonomous institutional presence in the media, beyond the
research they fund. Indeed, several prefer a more shadowy role, leaving
their research contractors to court media attention:

One of the trustees summed it up very nicely and said that the nicest thing of all
is to do good by stealth, because that’s what we should do. And then be found
out. But there is no particular percentage in it for us to get our names in the
paper, really. . . . When we’re seeking to influence we try and do it through our
projects rather than directly ourselves.

We are interested in getting media attention and media coverage as it might
relate to a subject, because we think the subject is important. We’re not remotely
interested in attaching our name or establishing a reputation for doing research.
. . . . Our trustees aren’t looking for their name in lights all the time. (Research
director, philanthropic foundation (grant giving))

Not surprisingly, the foundations most disposed towards ‘doing good by
stealth’ are typically those that place least emphasis on media and dissemi­
nation issues. But even where the more proactive foundations invest time
and resources in creating a consistent public image for their publications
and publicity material, their reasons for doing so are based less on issues of
self-promotion. For example, although one foundation insists that all news
releases and research reports it is associated with conform to a strict ‘house
style’ bearing its distinctive logo, it does so because this brand imaging is
seen to aid the publicizing of the research findings – by visually linking the
research to the foundation’s established reputation. In other words, these requirements are intended to confer status by association.

In some cases, this self-effacement reflects a general social expectation that modesty should accompany charity; but it is not the sole reason why these sources tend to be less concerned with self-promotion and image maintenance. As these foundations are private agencies they are not bound by the same expectations regarding the demonstration of accountability, cost-effectiveness and legitimacy of purpose that confront all public bodies to a greater or lesser extent. Furthermore, as these foundations have comparatively stable income derived from long-standing legacies and investment programmes, they have no need to lobby loud and hard in the public arena to protect their share of the pressurized public purse.

Common Themes

We can see, therefore, that there are considerable differences in the attitudes of research funders to publicity and media issues, and that these are rooted in the different institutional functions of these sources. But it is important to recognize that there are also areas of convergence among these sources. In particular, two common themes emerged from the interviews. We term these ‘selective amplification’ and ‘appropriate communication’.

Selective Amplification

When describing the willingness of individuals or institutions to seek publicity and media attention it is tempting to focus solely on their general, endemic inclinations. But the incentives of particular sources are contextual as well as structural, and may vary periodically. There are occasions when even the most publicity-hungry politician would prefer to avoid the media spotlight, just as there are times when the most secretive of organizations can reap political benefits from a transient period of media attention. Certainly, this sort of contextual variation is evident among the various funding agencies. For example, even the most habitually indifferent – central government departments – agreed that there are occasions when they stir from their inertia and make concerted efforts to communicate research findings more widely. Sometimes their reasons are for public information purposes, but they are also often driven by vested departmental interests:

The submission to the minister will always be about three things. It will be about (a) can we publish and with whom? (b) about the level of free distribution of the copies that we have to buy within the budget, and (c) the level of the media coverage that we would wish to have or seek, or not, as the case may be. And for every research report, that consideration will be given. . . . Sometimes we know that ministers would want publicity, that for them it would be useful. The other reason why we might be looking for publicity, or we might want to arrange for a
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parliamentary question or something, is because the research will already have had quite a lot of attention drawn to it. ... So for each subject we will consider what is the appropriate type of coverage. (Director of research, government department)

These sorts of political calculation are not the sole preserve of government departments. The interviews showed that almost all funding sources engaged to some degree in what we term the 'selective amplification' of certain research findings. For example, one foundation internally ranks each concluded project as either gold, silver or bronze, and concentrates most resources in launching and publicizing those that fall into the first category. And although these ranking decisions are substantially based on appraisals of research quality, they are also informed by political judgements about how much impact the research will have in a wider public context and how it fits with the sources' broader objectives. In a similar way, the ESRC often targets additional promotional support to research that it decides merits the widest public dissemination:

We issue press releases partly if there is something like a major conference that we're supporting. ... We also put effort in identifying bits of research that might be coming out of the system or make a judgement about whether it's worth highlighting that research. We couldn't do every piece of research. And not every piece of research would be appropriate to communicate via the media. (ESRC representative)

This point about selective amplification has important implications for our general discussion about media reporting of the social sciences, as it demonstrates that the politics of research funding does not reside solely in the types of research that institutions are prepared to commission, but also in their subsequent decisions as to which work they are prepared to disseminate. In this regard, their influence is not so much felt through crude acts of suppression and censorship, but in the opposite scenario: how and when they invest their own considerable material resources and institutional capital to heighten the public profile of certain types of findings and conclusions.

Appropriate Communication

Although many funding sources are very keen to attract general publicity and media attention to the research they support, none of them subscribed to the crude adage that all publicity is good publicity. Rather, all at some time referred, obliquely or explicitly, to the concept of 'appropriate communication'. These particular interviews suggested two dimensions to this concept. The first is a recognition that different types of research require different types of dissemination strategies, and that on certain occasions media attention may be either of negligible importance or even undesirable. Not surprisingly, this point was most readily articulated by the most publicity orientated sources, but even the more indifferent recognized that
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Communication strategies should be targeted and tailored to the particular nature of the message:

We use a concept of appropriate communication. If you've got a piece of research on regulation, say, and the research is seeking to have an influence on regulators, regulated companies, then you would probably try to get material into the FT, Economist, Sunday Times, specialist magazines, specialist journals. . . . It depends very much on what goals the researcher would have in terms of communication. Who their audiences are. . . . Obviously, some [media] are more significant than others . . . . I suppose we would say that the concept of the general public doesn't exist and that you have to look at little groups within that. And so we use the women's press, for example, magazines, for particular types of research. We've used local media for others. The whole public understanding of science is something that tends to assume that people are very similar, yet there are differences there. . . . If you genuinely want to reach audiences you know that you can reach in a particular way, then you don't have to use the media. The media often work in conjunction with other bits of communication, so it's all part of the package and we would argue that it's important for researchers to have a strategy for how they would relate to users and others. (ESRC representative)

You have to be prepared to use whatever media are interested but also whatever seem appropriate for that end. (Director of a philanthropic foundation, collaborative entrepreneur)

This point highlights the mistake of assuming an overly media-centric model of research dissemination and publicity processes within the social science community. Although the media are evidently gaining in importance, as certain funding institutions seek to communicate with broader audiences, they still remain just one among several potential communication channels, and their significance will vary depending on the nature of the issue and the intended audience.

The second dimension to appropriate communication relates to these sources' attitudes towards different forms of mainstream media. Even the most publicity-orientated funding agencies expressed reservations about the value of attracting coverage from the more populist media. This was partly due to a perception that the sensationalist, entertainment inclinations of these media make them unreceptive, even hostile, environments for research dissemination. But it also reveals the implicit communicative concerns of these agencies. Populist media tend to be deemed inappropriate because they do not speak to the specialized 'user communities' that these sources are seeking to address: professionals, practitioners, policy makers, politicians, and so on. In this regard, we see the limits to the broadening communication horizons of many of these agencies. The media are seen as potentially useful mechanisms for enhancing elite networking rather than as vehicles for more diffuse, public knowledge purposes:

I think that people tend to neglect that the media is also a source of communicating with your peers. In that, our evidence on communication within the research community itself shows that in similar areas people don't know what's going on and they don't mix. (ESRC representative)
Host Institutions

From this selective review of the position of several funding institutions regarding communication and publicity issues we can already see how various institutional and political pressures may exert a significant pressure upon social scientific researchers in their communication and dissemination activity. As discussed earlier these institutions comprise but one part of the communication environment of the social sciences. Therefore, our analysis now turns to consider the institutions that comprise the other main constituents of the communication environment: those that act as hosts to social science researchers.

Once again, we do not have the space here to discuss all institutions that could be categorized as hosts for social scientific research. Instead, we compare the views of representatives of the two main types of host institution in the UK: universities and independent research institutes. As with funding agencies, it is possible to discern different perspectives on communication and publicity issues that emerge from the distinctive structure and function of these institutions.

Universities

Universities fulfil a dual purpose, as teaching institutions and bases for research activity. In Britain both have witnessed major structural and financial changes since the 1980s (Milliband, 1992). The broad reasons for these transformations have already been discussed, relating as they do to the general economic pressures on all forms of public expenditure as well as the particular political dispositions of successive Conservative governments towards the academic establishment (Hills, 1992). However, it is necessary here to identify what the main changes have been, as this contextual detail allows us to understand the broader disposition of these institutions towards media and publicity issues.

In terms of teaching, the main change has been a huge expansion in student numbers since 1988. This growth has been initiated and fostered by the government as part of its aim to improve the general skills basis of the workforce and thereby the competitiveness of the British economy. Yet this increase has not been matched by a corresponding growth in central government funding. According to the Committee of Vice Chancellors and Principals of the Universities of the UK, in the six-year period between 1989/90 and 1994/5, student numbers in higher education increased by 61 per cent, but the amount allocated by government per student fell by 25 per cent (CVCP, 1995: 1). This pressure has been particularly keenly felt in social science departments, where a large proportion of the expansion in student numbers has occurred (Webb, 1992). Universities have been expected to reconcile these divergent trends of numerical expansion and financial constriction, on the one hand by achieving "efficiency gains" within their institutions, and on the other by exploring alternative sources of
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revenue-raising. By the mid-1990s many universities found it difficult to square this financial circle, and in 1996, with university administrators threatening to impose additional ‘top up’ fees on all new students to cover the shortfall, the government agreed to set up an official inquiry to look at all aspects of higher education funding and consider the most appropriate strategies for fundamental reform.8

One of the key elements in the government’s strategy for increasing access to higher education was its removal of a long-standing division between universities and polytechnics. Following the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act, most of the old polytechnics, along with many higher education colleges, acquired full university status.9 This transformation both widened the opportunities for university entrance, and fostered a more competitive climate between universities over student recruitment. Concerns about achieving recruitment targets have since been compounded by changes in university admissions procedures, and by the introduction of significant financial penalties from central government for those that under-recruit and, more recently, over-recruit.10

At the same time as this shift away from elitism in higher education teaching, in research terms the trend has been towards greater elitism, with alterations in the science base of the university sector. Under the previous binary arrangement, universities received a block grant from government, a significant proportion of which was intended to support research activity, whether in buying research facilities or in securing time for academics to devote to research activities. By comparison, research subsidization of this kind for polytechnics was negligible. By removing the basis of this ‘funding apartheid’, the abolition of the binary line secured the effective demise of this long-established practice of automatic support for research activity because, as Webb explains, ‘the cost of funding polytechnics for research at the rate pertaining in universities was not one that politicians would countenance’ (1992: 116). In its place a new principle of ‘research selectivity’ has assumed ever greater importance, as the government seeks to target its research support. Under this new selective funding system, some will gain but many will lose, as the aggregate amount of research moneys has not increased but has been redirected in relation to research ratings.11

For all these reasons, British universities confront a situation of almost unprecedented uncertainty: having to wrestle with an increasingly pressurized financial situation, being required to respond to a volatile policy environment, and having to compete effectively in a changing academic marketplace, whether for students or research income. These political and financial uncertainties have had two effects on the internal practices of these institutions that are particularly germane to this discussion.

Firstly, they have fostered more centralized managerial structures within universities, in which power has shifted away from academics towards managers and fundraisers, a change deemed necessary to speed up these institutions’ responses to volatile political and economic conditions (Wilson, 1995). Secondly, this growth of managerialism has encouraged
many universities to draw on established marketing practices developed in
the private sector to promote their ‘products’ in an ever more competitive
marketplace. A central feature of this has been a greater emphasis on
communication and publicity issues. According to Wernick, the era of the
‘promotional university’ has now arrived, in which:

The days of discreetly passing the hat are over. With the multiplication of
universities, and with governments insisting that they go to the private sector for
a greater proportion of their financial support, university fund raising, whether
targeted at corporations, alumni or the public at large, has become a highly
competitive business. The various supplicant universities must compete, more­
over, not only with one another, but also with all those other agencies, from
Oxfam to art galleries, that are similarly hustling for donors. ... Both indi­
vidually and collectively, the adoption of a promotional mode has become
indispensable to academic survival. (1991: 156, 177; emphasis added)

Certainly, all of the senior managers and publicity and marketing officers
we interviewed were convinced that effective publicity, and in particular
a prominent and positive media presence, has a crucial role to play in
attracting students, aiding fundraising, and enhancing the research reputa­
tion of an institution:

Why do we publicize developments in mobile communications and the research
done on it here? I suspect not to inform the mobile communications industry.
You do it to tell people that we’re at the cutting edge. (Registrar, ‘old’ university)

Universities are looking at a more competitive world now. They compete for
students, funding, not only in this country but internationally. A profile is
important in that and so is media dissemination, media coverage. It can’t create
what doesn’t exist in the way of quality. But what it can do is ensure that the
quality of the teaching, research, academic excellence, that is going on,’ receives
the acknowledgement ... that it deserves. (Press officer, ‘old’ university)

Recruitment. You reinforce messages with potential students, potential staff,
potential postgrads, that kind of thing. [Media coverage] can reinforce advertising
of course to those target audiences. It can generate funding or help to generate
funding. If it happens at the right time. (Press officer, ‘new’ university)

It’s awareness really. ... That’s got to be a factor, especially with the next
research assessment exercise coming up. ... It’s important to keep reminding
people that we’re there, we’re capable, doing some useful applied research. (Head
of marketing, ‘new’ university)

As part of this general wish to generate more positive publicity, all of the
institutions we analysed have sought to increase the professionalism and
extent of their publicity work. On one level this has involved increasing
investment in their communication infrastructure (establishing publicity
offices, appointing press and marketing personnel, etc.); on another it
has involved attending to presentation issues such as developing a clear
‘corporate image’ and distributing glossy promotional material:

We’ve actually managed to create a university magazine, in which we promote
research. And we target audiences, businesses, according to what’s in it. ... It’s
an external publication. It always was but now we’re targeting businesses and
appropriate types of people. (Press officer, ‘new’ university)
I think that if you went back ten years you would see that this office has moved from being an 'information department' in inverted commas to being very much a press and media office. But that is not all that we do. And it's worth bearing in mind because you will find that most of my colleagues have many other things to do as well. Such as producing an annual report, helping to produce this video, advising people on the presentation of newsletters, producing our own newsletter. (Media officer, 'old' university)

It is within this context that the media are seen to play such a key role: not only in providing a cost-effective way of increasing the distribution of publicity material, but also as an important means of enhancing the public status of an institution. These institutions are of course not alone in this recognition. For as Gandy has observed (1982: 14): 'Information that would be accepted only with caution if its source were identified as a partisan in a debate is much more powerful if it is received as objective fact, reported by an uninterested [sic] journalist.'

Interestingly, the interviews with senior management and publicity personnel seem to suggest a subtly different perception from many funding agencies of what we have termed appropriate communication. For these interviewees the most frequent distinction drawn was not so much between quality and populist media as between national and local media outlets, with a clear and consistent preference for the former. Although most said they have very well established reciprocal contacts with local media, this coverage was judged to be only marginally important. Instead, most of the interviewees identified the main prize as being that of national coverage, mainly because their recruitment needs and research ambitions are national rather than regional in nature:

I certainly don't discount the tabloids. Potential students or their parents read them... National coverage, to me, as long as it's not adverse publicity, is good news, no matter where it lands. But in terms of internal credibility, and I'm sure you've been speaking to a number of PR people in universities, you will know that we are seen as overheads by academics. Especially in today's climate. They, by and large, don't read tabloids, therefore something that appears in The Times is going to carry a lot more weight with them than something that appears in the Sun. (Press officer, 'new' university)

The policy is to gain as much national media coverage as possible. International [media], we're not up to, just because of resources. But I have found that by touting stories of national interest and sending them along to the agencies that deal internationally we do get a fair degree of international coverage. Local and regional coverage come off the back of any national stories. What we don't do at the moment is to go out of our way to look for stories with regional interest around the country. Although we do target national stories regionally. (Press officer, 'old' university)

All the media officers interviewed said they were trying hard both to rationalize and centralize their institutions' media relations. Apart from offering predictable sorts of support, such as writing news releases on behalf of academics and occasionally offering media training, these tasks also frequently involved developing internal registers and monitoring
systems to keep these officers abreast of in-house expertise and research developments. Most were particularly concerned with establishing a key gatekeeping role, in which journalists and academics alike appreciate the importance of conducting their exchanges via them:

Keeping a tight hand on the rein is very important, I find. . . . We insist that journalists come through this office, and by and large they respect that. . . . Unsolicited coverage can sometimes be very damaging. And the sort of coverage that is generated by picking up the phone and phoning somebody in the university knowing that they need to bypass the official points of contact like myself can generate some horrendous stuff. And I can see all sorts of disadvantages to that. (Press officer, 'new' university)

We're trying to tighten up on this media experts list and we're getting a proper research database together that will be fed by media relations. (Marketing manager, 'new' university)

However, all of the press and marketing officers interviewed acknowledged that they had encountered difficulties in their attempts to centralize and rationalize media relations, for a range of reasons. Some of these were due to basic resource limitations. For, although their institutions' investment in communication and publicity may have increased, this expenditure is inevitably limited by broader financial realities:

Much as I would like to actually spend more time with media things and goodness knows there's plenty of stuff going on which would make very interesting stories, you have to prioritize. And we therefore do as much as we possibly can with the press. But I think most people in my position also would tell you this. That they would love another member of staff to do this, another member of staff to do that and the university budgets don't run to it . . . So then you have to make a balance in order to run a department efficiently, between what is possible and what would be very nice if you had more resources. (Media officer, 'old' university)

But the difficulties experienced by these intermediaries were not solely due to financial limitations. Several found that the sheer size of many universities and their diverse administrative structure, in which departments and faculties often still retain a considerable degree of operational autonomy, combine as another significant barrier to the achievement of a fully centralized media operation. The 'sprawling nature' of universities (as one interviewee put it) makes it difficult both for the media officers to communicate their presence and role to rank and file academics, and for them to monitor what is going on, on a university-wide basis. Although, as mentioned, several press officers were seeking to develop monitoring systems within their host institutions, most identified internal communication as a persistent problem.

The final major obstruction was seen to relate to the disposition of academic staff towards communication and publicity issues. Most of these officers said they often found that the eagerness of senior management to attract publicity wasn't universally shared by those working lower down the institutional hierarchy:
There isn't a culture here whereby each academic automatically thinks I'll give [the press officer] a call when they've got a report coming out. (Press officer, 'new' university)

I'm working on [a media workshop] with one of my media superstars, a guy in education who loves the media. Half-day workshops on how the media works, the advantages of being in it or on it. How to write news releases and the very barest bones of how to come across in an interview. . . . But, as I found out with the radio training workshops, although the interest is high, the commitment isn't necessarily so. I've really had to nag people to get there. (Press officer, 'new' university)

In the next chapter we return to this issue about the media orientation of social scientists engaged in research.

Independent Research Institutes

Outside the university sector and government, independent Research Institutes (IRIs) collectively constitute the most significant hosts for social scientific research. Their role and distinctiveness is summarized by Bulmer (1993: 37):

They are non-profit organisations, registered as a charity, characterised by a focus on high quality social research, managed by and employing social researchers and independent of other organisational ties. Thus although they cooperate with and carry out research for clients in the academic world, central and local government, the voluntary sector and in some cases commercial companies, they have no formal ties to any outside organisations such as political parties, pressure groups or commercial interests and are answerable to independent boards of trustees.

As the sole and self-evident raison d'être of IRIs is research, and as most do not have stable core funding, their continued existence depends upon attracting grant income from external institutions. To do so effectively requires the development of a research agenda and subject expertise that accords closely with the needs and demands of these funding agencies. For this reason, the research orientation of IRIs tends to differ from dominant patterns within academia (Trist, 1970). As Bulmer goes on to explain:

[Research activity] is generic and problem oriented rather than discipline focused, it is applied rather than basic research, and multi disciplinary in character. The majority audience which such organisations aim to reach is policy and decisionmakers, with informed public opinion the second priority, rather than firstly the scientific community of peers. The latter are much less important than in the case of academic research. (1993: 38)

Because of this primary disposition towards political and social elites beyond academia, it is not surprising that these research organizations have a clear and well-established recognition of the importance of effective publicity, and, in particular, an acute sensitivity to the potential value of mainstream media coverage. In our interviews with several IRI directors, a range of reasons were given as to why the media are seen to play a key role
in consolidating their work and reputation. Firstly, unlike most academic publishing, which tends to be conducted via external agencies (academic publishers, journals, etc.), IRIs tend to concentrate on in-house publishing, both as a means for controlling and speeding up dissemination, and as a useful source of revenue. The media play a central part in promoting and selling these publications:

Our main intention for PR is to promote interest in the reports. It's mainly a commercial interest. . . . We want to raise money. (Research director, IRI)

Media coverage can be quite crucial in terms of getting something really widely known. That, say, gets it on reading list. What really makes a book sell is it getting on reading lists. (Research director, IRI)

Beyond this immediate financial benefit, media coverage is also seen to be of value in attracting research income; not in any crude and direct sense—in which funding agencies are assumed to allocate grants in a knee-jerk response to public exposure—but rather through subtler, longer-term processes. It is felt that media coverage helps to establish and maintain a high public profile for particular institutes, and tacitly underlines the importance and topicality of their work. Furthermore, the link between publicity and funding is seen to have strengthened in recent years, as a consequence of the changing disposition of key funding agencies towards dissemination issues:

It's about generating an image for [the institute]. We sell ourselves as being an organization which does high-quality independent research across a range of areas. You sustain that reputation partly by what you do, so that you've delivered pieces of research that particular people are interested in and recognise. But partly, that they've heard of you. So if people say to me there's been a lot about [the institute] in the papers over the last few months, I say 'good!' Because they won't necessarily remember . . . what it is we've published but they have remembered that there was some high-quality coverage of some research. And it just adds to prestige. . . . The ESRC never used to care [about publicity]. The ESRC with its new mission statement now cares enormously about it. Because this is about survival for the ESRC. So if you're seen to be funding stuff which is of sufficiently wide-ranging interest that it gets press coverage, then this helps sustain the case that the 'user community' [values the research]. The ESRC never used to terribly value the fact that [the institute] has always attached a lot of importance to dissemination. But they do now. (Research director, IRI)

A lot of funders like [media coverage], particularly in the corporate sector. When we're getting money from the trusts, I think they like it too. . . . But when we go into the corporate sector for corporate money, which we do increasingly now, one of our main selling points is that we manage to get our reports into the newspapers and out into the media. (Research director, IRI)

In addition to these financial considerations, regular media coverage is also seen as offering valuable support for the broader political objectives of these institutes. Because of their focused policy orientation and well-developed subject expertise, many IRIs do not see their purpose as simply to service the research needs of policy makers, but also to intervene in current political debates around policy formulation and implementation. In
this framework, media exposure is seen as useful for alerting political elites and informed public opinion to their views, and as a political lever:

If you ask what the mission of [the institute] is, it's to do rigorous economics, which we take very seriously. But it's to do it in areas of public policy concern. So if that's what we're doing then it makes sense to try to hit the right buttons and it was clear fairly early on that one way of having something happen was to have it appear in the newspapers, in the press cuttings, on the ministers' desks. And that civil servants, by and large, feel very uncomfortable if something appears in the ministers' press cuttings that they don't know about. So by getting into the press at the most basic level you guarantee both the ministers and civil servants know what you're up to ... [but] it's not just ministers that matter. It's students and the public at large. And one of the things we're trying to do is not just affect current policy decisions, but inform people about reality as we understand it through the medium of economics. (Research director, IRI)

Because of the importance attributed to media's 'halo effect' in attracting research income and enhancing political influence, all of the institute representatives we interviewed shared a similar concern with the question of appropriate communication discussed earlier in this chapter, expressing a clear preference for prestige rather than popular media: that is, those outlets most likely to be monitored by the informed and the powerful:

[The tabloid press] are not on our press list. And my advice to people is not to speak to them. Well, it varies a bit, but one likes to be careful ... In half the newspapers, coverage isn't trying to seriously report your information. It's there for entertainment. And even the bits which are trying to be serious are actually very partial. ... And the other thing is, to be honest, it's not reaching the right sort of audience. I know quite a significant number of professional people do read the Sun, but we sort of assume that they're not in a serious frame of mind when they're reading it. (Research director, IRI)

We tend not to get any coverage except in the broadsheets ... Very occasionally we get coverage in the tabloids. It's always very lurid. Not something we would necessarily want to cultivate. (Research director, IRI)

The interviews with these sources also suggested a further dimension to the issues of selective amplification and appropriate communication, that only tacitly emerged in the interviews with the funding institutions. That is that their decisions about the 'appropriateness' of pursing media coverage are not solely determined by their own political objectives, but also by their judgements about whether the media are likely to be interested in a particular topic or piece of research. In other words, these sources have developed a clear 'vocabulary of precedents' (Ericson et al., 1989: 222) in their media relations, and these directly inform the emphasis placed on the media in particular dissemination instances. Furthermore, this sort of internal gatekeeping and selective promotion is seen as an vital element both in maintaining rapport with different media and enhancing the effectiveness of promotional ventures when they do occur. For although these sources are very keen to develop a high media profile, they are not blind to the reality that part of the skill of media management is in drawing attention to material most amenable to established media formats and interests:
It’s as much as anything else to do with our judgement of media interest and who might want to run it. And whether it’s going to be sufficiently appealing to a general audience to make it worth [the media's] while actually coming to a press conference and talking to a researcher. . . . It varies a bit according to subject matter . . . We don’t really try for television unless we know that it’s going to interest them, otherwise they just get annoyed. Because they’re badgered, these people. (Research director, IRI)

Conclusions

From this selective review of the communication environment of the social sciences three key themes can be discerned. Firstly, there is clear evidence of a growing promotional logic across this environment, in which many of its constituent institutions are developing greater awareness of the potential importance of the mainstream media, as means for enhancing their reputation or extending their influence. Secondly, these trends have developed unevenly. Some institutions have only recently acquired a refined publicity consciousness; others have had such an orientation for much longer. Still others remain unconvinced about these matters, although there are signs that even they are beginning to feel some inclination to reappraise their dissemination practices in light of the changes occurring around them. Thirdly, it is only possible to understand the differing positions and practices of the various institutions on these matters by examining their functions and the specific political and economic conditions under which they operate. Such a perspective allows us to see how the advance of promotionalism in this institutional nexus is rooted in broad systemic uncertainties, some of which have been around for a long time, others of which have only recently come to the fore. In particular, it reveals that indifference to promotional matters is increasingly seen as the sole prerogative of the solvent or the powerful.

Beyond these points, this examination of the communication environment of the social sciences also raises wider issues. In terms of the broader theoretical concerns of this book, it is important to consider to what extent these sources’ prejudices about what is likely to be appropriate for mass mediation inadvertently serve to reinforce residual news values and contribute to patterns of inclusion and absence in media coverage of social scientific knowledge. This process has been noted in relation to other professional and institutional contexts, in particular politics, where sources’ anticipation of news selection criteria produces a ‘hermeneutic circle’ that constrains the formation of future news discourses (see Ericson et al., 1987, 1989), and it would seem there are aspects of it in this context. Certainly, any discussion of significant absences in media reporting of social science research needs to take account of the potentially constraining influence of sources’ pre-selection of information offered to the mainstream media, and to recognize that the mediation of social scientific knowledge does not always begin with a journalist. As Ericson et al. comment: ‘It is reasonable
to argue that the real reporters are source spokespersons, who do all the essential "signwork"... within their organization in order to produce an acceptable news account' (1989: 6).

In political terms, there is also a need to consider what impact growing publicity consciousness and media awareness is having on the direction and formulation of research activity in this area. Could it be that the greater sensitivity of some host and funding agencies to these matters is encouraging preferences for particular types of research over others? Certainly, in other political arenas it has been noted that one of the potential consequences of an increased media-centredness among institutions is the 'spurious amplification' of certain values and practices over others (Blumler, 1987: 352), where 'policy decisions are more likely to be influenced by how they will play in the arena of media-filtered perceptions' (Blumler, 1990: 106). In terms of this research, any suggestion of a link can only be made by inference, for although promotionalism is increasing in this environment, almost all interviewees denied that publicity considerations exerted any direct influence on their practices and priorities. Indeed, the most commonly expressed view was that communication considerations only became important 'after the fact', once research had been completed. But surely there are grounds for questioning such a linear and atomized model of communication and dissemination, for no piece of research is conceived or conducted in an historical vacuum. Through experience and precedence, these institutions will have gained insights into the kinds of issue and approach that resonate most effectively in particular arenas, and these must inevitably feed back into the research formulation process, shaping priorities and approaches. Consequently, if the media are assuming greater importance among to funding and host agencies, it is surely justified to speculate that media-related considerations may be exerting some refractive influence on policy decisions in this context. However, in raising this question, we would caution against overstating it, as there are several obvious factors that would constrain the untrammelled application of media logic in this area. For example, although research activity may be permeated by politics, it is not politics in the formal sense, and research quality is not primarily evaluated in terms of popularity and palatability, but by complex and established intellectual and methodological criteria. However much these institutions may want to gain publicity and recognition for the work they support, they must attend to its professional recognition and credibility, and this requires consideration of, and exposure to, peer review procedures which exist independently of mainstream media values.

Notes

1 Eleven interviews were conducted with representatives from institutions classified in this chapter as 'funding agencies' (five from government departments, five from philanthropic organizations, and one from a research council). Sixteen interviews were conducted with representatives from 'host institutions' (seven from the university sector, five from independent
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research institutes, and four from professional associations). Interviewee selection closely related to the sampling criteria used for the general survey of social scientists (see next chapter). Most of the interviews exceeded an hour, and all were transcribed and analyzed using the NUDIST qualitative analysis package. The quotations presented are derived from a thematic analysis using this software. Unless stated, they are illustrative of recurring themes that emerged among particular categories of interviewees.

2 Following the international oil crisis in 1974, the British government received economic aid from the International Monetary Fund after agreeing that all forms of public expenditure would be controlled.

3 Most government research contracts require the contractors to sign the Official Secrets Act.

4 These nine themes are: 'Economic performance and development', 'Environment and sustainability', 'Globalization, regions and emerging markets', 'Governance and regulation', 'Human Communication and the Social Shaping of Technology', 'Innovations, Organizations and Business Processes', 'Knowledge and Skill', 'Lifespan, Lifestyles and Health' and 'Social Integration and Exclusion'.

5 For example, the Council's five-year plan explicitly identifies 'work on innovation' as one of its key corporate aims and objectives (although this emphasis is mainly construed in terms of finding ways of increasing UK economic competitiveness).

6 For example, a very senior representative of the Council stated, in a conference address in 1996, that researchers making funding applications would do well to give some thought to how their proposed research might look 'on the front page of the Daily Express'.

7 The detail in this section concerns the higher education (HE) sector in England and Wales. Although the HE sector in Scotland shares similar features, and is experiencing similar pressures and undergoing similar transformations, there remain important organizational and historical differences that we do not have the space to address in this chapter.

8 Acute financial pressures within higher education have not only been felt at institutional level. At the same time, and for similar reasons, student grants have been squeezed and a new loan system introduced, thereby compelling new students to make substantial (and unprecedented) financial contributions to their education costs.

9 Under the old system, polytechnics were considered to be more vocational in purpose and less involved in basic research than the traditional university sector. Furthermore, unlike universities, polytechnics did not have the authority to award their own degrees. All awards had to be ratified by a central body: the Council for National Academic Awards.

10 In 1993 the government took steps to rein back the exponential increase in student numbers by introducing a three-year freeze on intake numbers, the first of its kind since the 1970s (Guardian, 4 March 1994: 23).

11 The first formal rating of individual university departments and centres by government began in 1988, but it was only with the second 'research assessment exercise' that the research rating started to have a major impact on the financial position of university departments.
From inception to reception: the natural history of a news item

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Encoding and decoding: 'linked but distinctive moments'

The development of mass communication research has been neither linear nor incremental. Rather, it is marked by moments of sudden transition and transformation. In most historical accounts of the field these moments are linked to the publication of key-texts which are seen to have either instigated or encapsulated new currents of intellectual activity. Stuart Hall’s article ‘Encoding and Decoding in Television Discourse’, which was first presented in the early 1970s, can make a stronger claim than most to such seminal status, providing the impetus for the development of what we generically label here as the ‘active audience paradigm’.

The influence of Hall’s article can be located to two aspects. The first is the developed theoretical framework it provides for applying semiotic concepts outside of the text. Most central to this is his insistence that more attention should be paid to the ‘practice of interpretative work’ in the decoding of televisual signs by audiences, and in particular, to how that reception frequently involved the ‘active transformation’ of meaning (Hall, 1993: 94).

The second related reason for the article’s impact was its challenge to conventional models of mass communication which are criticized for their inability to develop ‘a structured conception’ of the relationship between messages, their sources and their receivers. Hall proposes that the mass communication process should be thought of as:

[0163-4437(199901)21:1;5-31;006790]
... a structure produced and sustained through the articulation of linked but distinctive moments – production, circulation, distribution/consumption, reproduction. This would be to think of the process as a 'complex structure in dominance', sustained through the articulation of connected practices, each of which, however, retains its distinctiveness and has its own specific modality, its own forms and conditions of existence. (Hall, 1993: 91)

The emphases in this quotation are our own, and we highlight them here because they reveal an important facet of Hall's model which has often been neglected. Although it stresses the relative autonomy of the moments of production and reception, it also retains a clear view of their interrelationship. Certainly, in no way is its expressed interest in the distinctiveness of decoding intended to exclude social, political and economic questions about message production from the research agenda.

This article seeks to develop the key theme of linkage between encoding and decoding. Our reasons for doing so are rooted in a belief that these important connections have too often been neglected in reception analysis research since the 1980s. Furthermore, although, as we discuss below, there are clear signs that many active audience theorists are adopting more modest appraisals of the power of the audience to renegotiate inscribed meaning in texts, we believe much would be gained by extending the analysis beyond the text itself, and attending more closely to the dynamics of its inception and creation.

In this article we investigate the 'natural history' of the production and reception of a specific example of press reporting. Although this is in many respects a modest empirical exercise, it does provide a useful illustration of the benefits that can accrue from a research focus that isn't solely fixated with the distinctiveness of decoding, and which retains the holism of the original encoding/decoding formulation. As such, it is intended to contribute to a growing body of work which stresses the importance of studying the entirety of mass communication processes (e.g. Bondebjerg, 1988; Carragee, 1990).

Before we present the detail of our study, it is first necessary to consider current trends and parallels within reception- and production-orientated research.

Active audience research in the 1990s: a new sobriety?

The initial flurry of active audience research which developed out of the encoding/decoding formulation is typically presented as in opposition to textual analysis, such as that associated with Screen writers, because it queried the ability of any person to divine a singular interpretation of a text. In some cases, this opposition opened a gap between those writers who have suggested, on the one hand, that the mass media are mechanisms
for the dissemination of the ideology of the powerful or that they constrain the beliefs and values of the audiences and, on the other hand, those proponents of the active audience approach who suggest the audience can resist all manner of ideology by generating meanings entirely of their own making. In the process, an opposition was created between writers who emphasize political economy and production in relation to the media and those who emphasize audience reception analysis.

There is some evidence of a tempering of both these divides and of the active audience approach itself. First, the approach has been subjected in recent times to a number of criticisms. By drawing attention away from the media and texts generally as instruments of power, it has been accused of a lack of an appreciation of wider political factors and hence of political quietism (Corner, 1991). It has also been suggested that many studies within the active audience tradition have entailed misinterpretations of the research evidence. Condit (1989), for example, argued that the common finding that audiences derive their own pleasures from texts should not be taken to imply that they are in fact deriving their own interpretation and therefore undermining the inscribed messages of those texts. She shows through an examination of points made by two people about an episode of Cagney and Lacey that ‘they shared a basic construction of the denotations of the text’ (1989: 107), in spite of holding very different views about the central focus of the episode (abortion). Thus, while audiences are active in their consumption of texts they are not necessarily critical of its denotation; nor do they derive alternative views about it. A further criticism is that the active audience approach fails to give adequate recognition to the fact that authors of texts are able to frame issues and messages. They do this through what is actually present in the text and through what is absent—the silences in texts are just as significant as the messages within the texts themselves in terms of the capacity of audiences to derive alternative interpretations (Bryman, 1995).

Second, as a result of a growing awareness of the framing power of texts, more circumscribed accounts of audience activity are emerging. These tend to recognize that differently located audiences may derive particular interpretations of texts, but that the text itself is rarely subverted. In other words, the essential power of authors to frame audience reception is not challenged; audiences engage in marginal interpretation (see for example, Kitzinger, 1993; Corner et al., 1990; Miller, 1994).

Third, some of the more prominent exponents of the active audience approach have begun to distance themselves from certain aspects of it. Jen Ang, whose Watching Dallas (1985) is often treated as an exemplar of active audience research, has commented that the notion of ‘active’ should not be equated with ‘powerful’ and that the extent to which audiences genuinely exert power over the text is limited (Ang, 1995). Likewise, David Morley has criticized the neglect in most active audience research of
'the economic, political and ideological forces acting on the construction of texts' (1993: 15).

These various reflections and developments point to a re-evaluation of the active audience approach that is currently in progress. At the very least, this re-evaluation needs to return to the original encoding/decoding model with its emphasis upon both the text and audience reception. On the face of it, John Fiske, who is most frequently presented as the most extreme proponent of audience autonomy, displayed this orientation when he wrote in an often-quoted remark: 'Cultural analysis reaches a satisfactory conclusion when the ethnographic studies of the historically and socially located meanings that are made are related to the semiotic analysis of the text' (1989: 98). However, it is not simply the confrontation between textual meaning and audience reception that is at stake here. As Kellner (1995) argues, a formulation such as Fiske's omits crucial mediations, such as the ways texts are produced and the wider political economy of that production. The recent movement toward 'holistic' approaches to media analysis, then, needs to be one in which consideration of the production and framing of texts plays a major part.

Active production: new trends and obvious parallels

Significantly, there are many developments within media-production research which offer clear opportunities for linkage with theoretical developments in active audience research. These almost solely relate to the production of actuality genres, particularly news and current affairs, reflecting a historical imbalance in production research.

For many years the study of news and current affairs production has been dominated by two approaches. The first explores how political and economic forces, in particular patterns of ownership in media industries and state regulation, structurally circumscribe news creation (e.g. Golding and Murdock, 1991; Garnham, 1979). The second focuses on media organizations, and the impact of the professional practices and cultural values of journalists (e.g. Tuchman, 1978). Of course, these two approaches are not necessarily antithetical, and there are many examples of interchange between them. Even so, there are undeniable tensions between these traditions, mainly concerning whether internal or external factors constitute the principal determinants of news production. At the core of this debate are questions about the limits to journalists' professional autonomy (Curran, 1990).

Recently, a third approach to the study of news production can be discerned, which, according to McNair (1994), offers an opportunity for a reconciliation between both paradigms. He labels this the 'culturalist approach', although it also bears a resemblance to work on agenda building.
(e.g. Lang and Lang, 1981). Whatever its title, the distinctiveness of this position lies in its insistence that the production of news 'is not simply a function of ownership, nor of journalistic practices and rituals, but of the interaction between news organisations, the sources of their output, and other social institutions' (McNair, 1994: 48). In other words, news creation is portrayed as a form of 'cultural argumentation ... an unending battle between a multitude of differentially powerful parties over the definition of reality' (Turow, 1989: 206; emphasis added).

One important and inevitable consequence of this new emphasis is that it brings news sources to the forefront of the research equation. Although many earlier organizational studies identified the importance of external institutions and individuals in the structuring of news (Sigal, 1973; Gans, 1979), they were generally studied by proxy, from the vantage point of the news-makers. Over a decade ago, Gandy (1982) noted the paucity of primary research into news sources and it is only recently that, following his lead, work has begun to redress this neglect (e.g. Ericson et al., 1989; Anderson, 1991; Manning, 1996; Deacon, 1996).

This less media-centric emphasis has fostered more interest in the specific dynamics of news creation in particular instances. This has in turn created a growing dissatisfaction with many earlier accounts of news production, which are criticized for being too deterministic, and for overestimating the power of social and political elites to exercise hegemonic power via the mass media (e.g. Meyer, 1992).

Within this new research framework, the power of 'primary definition' is not seen as an axiomatic expression of the social structure, but rather 'an achievement' (Schlesinger, 1990) gained through successful strategic action. Although agencies of the state and other powerful political and economic elites obviously enjoy considerable advantages in getting their messages across, their definitional control is neither absolute nor predetermined. Tensions within political systems, journalistic acuteness, internal state disputes, and successful political interventions by non-official sources who have established their credibility with the media, can all combine to 'open up' media debate on certain issues, on certain occasions (Hallin, 1986; Miller, 1994; Deacon and Golding, 1994).

What is striking about this new body of media research is how closely many of its basic aims and concerns parallel those within active audience theory. Both paradigms reject reproductionist accounts of ideology, whether in terms of production or effect. Both have effectively subverted, whether intentionally or not, the 'grand narratives' of Marxism and Pluralism that had previously bifurcated the field of mass communication research in Britain. Both recognize the importance of social action and agency in cultural reproduction. Both challenge the view that the media are just a passive conduit by which the powerful instruct the powerless what to think and feel. However, at the same time, most proponents from both
positions are sensitive to the dangers of overstating the diversity and plurality that this resistance is capable of creating. Their interest in the autonomy of the moments of production and reception is counterbalanced by their concern with establishing the limits to this freedom. For all these reasons, the time is ripe for developing more direct conceptual and empirical links between these two paradigms, and for retying once more the strands of production and reception.

The case study

Our aim in this article is to present the ‘natural history’ of one newspaper report, tracing its gestation in the interaction between several individual and institutional sources and news professionals, through to details of its production, and then to its decoding by individuals from a diverse range of social groups. This analysis will be centrally concerned with the issue of definitional power, exploring the different ways in which competing institutional sources, media professionals and audience members seek to define the meaning in this particular instance.

The empirical basis of this case study is taken from a far more extensive research project undertaken by the authors investigating media representation of the social sciences (Fenton et al., 1998). The particular aspect of the research programme reported in this article involved detailed interviews with the cited news sources and the journalist involved in the production of the news story, plus 14 focus group interviews. The focus groups were selected according to variables of gender, education (up to GCSE, up to A-level and higher education) and employment (private sector/public sector).

The news article under scrutiny appeared in the broadsheet newspaper, the Guardian, on 13 January 1995, page 8, under the heading ‘Psychologists Guarded on “False Memory” of Abuse’ (see Appendix). It was written by a journalist designated as the paper’s medical correspondent. We deal with the substance of this article later in our discussion, and need only mention at this juncture that it deals with the question of so-called ‘False Memories’, and contrasts two competing views on the issue — those of the British Psychological Society (BPS) and the British False Memory Society (BFMS).

The issue of whether it is possible to ‘recover’ traumatic memories, particularly of a sexual nature, has been the source of considerable controversy over recent years. The basis of this dispute is whether these memories are real recollections of actual events, or whether they are false — implanted in the minds of vulnerable individuals by therapists who employ dubious therapeutic practices (in particular related to hypnotic regression and suggestion) and who are professionally obsessed with the issue of child abuse and its prevalence.
To understand and evaluate properly the representation of the issue in this article and the two competing news sources, it is necessary to pay attention to details of its inception and production. This involves two aspects: appraising the political and strategic actions of these two competing news sources in seeking to influence the frame of media coverage of the report; and considering the mediating role of the news-professional in translating these competing agendas into the final article.

**Inception: source motivations and communicative strategies**

**Initiation: the British Psychological Society**

The event that sparked the *Guardian*’s interest in the false/recovered memory debate on this occasion was a news conference held by the British Psychological Society on 12 January 1995 to launch the report of its Working Party on ‘recovered memories’. The British Psychological Society is a professional body that promotes the advancement and diffusion of a knowledge of psychology. The observance of strict rules of professional conduct is a condition of membership and it maintains a register of chartered psychologists.

The BPS investigation into recovered memories was set up in 1993 and was motivated as much by professional concern as it was by intellectual interest. As the principal representative of the psychological profession in Britain, the BPS was understandably concerned about the possibility that recovered memories might be manufactured by certain psychotherapeutic practices. The fact that ‘much of the debate [had] taken part in the public arena’ (Andrews et al., 1995: 209) — in particular the media — increased the pressure on the Society to respond to what the Chair of the Working Party later described as ‘a highly politicized situation’ (Morton, 1995: 103). There were also concerns that alarmist and unsubstantiated debate about the prevalence of ‘False Memory Syndrome’ was detracting media and public attention from the wider issue of child abuse.

The final conclusions of the Working Party’s report (BPS, 1995) were equivocal. An ‘executive summary’ stressed five points:

- that complete or partial memory loss is a frequently reported consequence of experiencing certain types of psychological trauma, including sexual abuse;
- that memories may be recovered within or independently of therapy;
- that the clarity and detail of event memories depend on a number of factors, including the age at which the event occurred;
- that sustained pressure or persuasion by an authority figure could lead to the retrieval or elaboration of ‘memories’ of events that never actually
happened, although there is no reliable evidence that this is a widespread phenomenon in the UK;
• that the possible existence of therapy induced false beliefs and recovery of memory from total amnesia is now accepted. Therefore, the key issue concerns the prevalence of each.

The report provided a set of guidelines for therapists but avoided recommending any changes in existing methods of regression therapy. The Society was acutely conscious that the nuances of this message — which kept the intellectual issue open, while cooling debate about widespread professional malpractice — might prove difficult to convey to the media. As one member of the Society's press committee commented after the news conference: 'You could almost smell the journalists' anguish. What was the line? What was the angle?' (Tysoe, 1995: 103). There were also particular concerns that this ambiguity might undermine media perceptions of the authoritativeness of the report's findings.

Consequently, the BPS paid careful attention to the public dissemination of the research. While seeking maximum media exposure for the conclusions, the Society sought to guard against misrepresentation and misinterpretation. It was hoped the physical presence of the Working Party at the news conference would help to reinforce and clarify the message and that the conference would be the first opportunity the media could have to report the study's conclusions. This exclusivity was intended both to enhance the news-value of the report and to wrong-foot opponents to its message. Before the launch, the circulation of preliminary drafts of the report within the BPS was strictly limited, and those who were permitted access were supposed to treat the details as confidential. Furthermore, although a news release was distributed in advance of the news conference to enable the media to preschedule their attendance, the material was embargoed until the day of the conference. In all, the Society expended considerable effort and expense to ensure the report only 'went public' on its own terms and in its own time.

In the event, these efforts met with mixed success. Leaving aside the question of media representation which we deal with later, the conference was successful in attracting considerable media attendance and comment. However, the information embargo was broken 12 days before the conference by The Sunday Times, who used a leaked draft of the report to argue that the BPS was endorsing inappropriate therapeutic practices ('Psychologists Endorse "Sex Memory" Therapy. Britain's psychologists have overwhelmingly endorsed a controversial technique of recovering "lost" memories of childhood sexual abuse, even though more than 500 families have been torn apart by false claims made by adult sons and daughters', 1 January 1995: 8). This premature breach caused considerable chagrin in the BPS. To explain the failure of this aspect of the BPS PR
strategy we need to consider the actions of the British False Memory Society.

Response: the British False Memory Society

The British False Memory Society (BFMS) was founded in April 1993 as a campaign organization for parents who had been accused of childhood sexual abuse by adult children after therapy. The stance of the organization is clear and unequivocal: that ‘recovered’ memories are false and are inculcated during psychotherapy. Since its creation it has been an influential issue entrepreneur on this topic, and has sought to align itself with a body of professional opinion within psychology that False Memory Syndrome can and does occur.

Initially the BFMS supported the BPS Working Party, and co-operated with it. Its stance changed when it obtained a leaked copy of a draft of the BPS report in November 1994, and it realized that the BPS would not support its position. However, this advance warning did give the organization valuable time to prepare a public relations counter-response.

Two days before the BPS news conference the organization distributed two news releases detailing its objections to the report. The first, headed ‘Psychologists Admit Using Questionable Therapy to Elicit “Memories” of Childhood Sexual Abuse’, contained a lengthy quotation from Professor L. Weiskrantz, Emeritus Professor of Psychology, University of Oxford, in which he claimed ‘The Report of the Working Party is deeply disappointing and, at its most crucial junctures, is badly flawed’. The second news release, headed ‘Patients at Risk as Psychologists Endorse Pseudo-Science’, ran to four densely-typed pages and criticized the report both in general and in detail, providing corroborative references from a range of governmental and scientific sources. It concluded that the BPS’s stance endorsed a modern equivalent of ‘spectral evidence’ (‘unsubstantiated allegations which fuelled the 17th century witchhunts’) and called on members of the BPS to ‘demand an enquiry into the methodology and assumptions of the report.’

A further PR response of the organization to the BPS launch occurred a few days earlier and was covert in nature. Although some at the BPS assumed that the British False Memory Society had been alerted to the substance of the report’s findings as a result of The Sunday Times’ preemptive article, this is a mistaken view. In point of fact, it was the BFMS that engineered the breaking of the BPS information embargo by passing on their leaked version of the Working Party’s report to The Sunday Times journalist, accompanied with a lengthy briefing from the BFMS director.
Key issues

There are several key points from this review of source activity that are salient to our broader discussion about the encoding and decoding of this news item. First, both sources were in open contest over the meaning of the BPS report and the recovered/false memory issue in general. Therefore, there were two interpretative frameworks immediately available for journalists to take. Second, both sources identified the media as the key battleground for winning the public debate on these matters, and they expended considerable energy in trying to set the media agenda. Third, these competing sources employed a range of strategies intended to gain definitional advantage in media terms. As the author of the report under debate, the BPS combined an initial strategy of ‘enclosure’ designed to inhibit media comment, with a grand, performative moment of ‘disclosure’ (Ericson et al., 1989). As critics of the BPS report, the BFMS derided its conclusions openly through a detailed press briefing timed to coincide with the BPS news conference, and privately by breaking down the BPS information embargo by leaking a draft of the report to a prestigious media contact. The organization also tried to focus media attention on the scientific validity of its arguments by giving prominence to the views of a member of its ‘scientific and advisory panel’ and quoting other expert and official sources. Fourth, the failure of the BPS to sustain its information embargo confirms Manning’s observation that ‘To exploit the mechanism of exclusivity, a news source must enjoy extensive control over the flow of information in order to both time and direct the release of information and direct its communication’ (1996: 250). In this example, the ‘porosity’ of the BPS provided its competitor with an unintended opportunity to challenge its preferred message.

These observations inevitably raise the issue of mediation. How did journalists respond to this competitive struggle for their attention, and what impact did their own professional codes and practices have in shaping the ‘preferred reading’ of the subject in coverage itself? Our analysis on the mediation of the Guardian article are derived from two sources: the testimony of the journalist himself and an analysis of the text. We begin with the comments of the journalist.

Mediation

The journalist’s perspective

The main reason expressed by the journalist for his interest in the BPS news conference on recovered memories was that the issue was already firmly established on the news agenda. The first national press articles on
'False Memory Syndrome' in Britain appeared in early 1993, and the issue had been flaring up recurrently since then. During that period, the topic had proved a particularly interesting and controversial area for the *Guardian* to report, given its liberal orientation.

Beyond this general assessment of the salience of the topic, the institutional status of the British Psychological Society also increased the journalist's perception of the news value of the event. As a specialist medical correspondent for the *Guardian*, the journalist has had considerable previous contact with the BPS and cultivated a respect for its authoritativeness:

The BPS is a reputable body that has a history of doing worthwhile research into psychology. They were issuing a formal report into False Memory Syndrome. False Memory Syndrome is a controversial area and I judged that their input to this would be worth reporting. (Interview with authors)

The journalist also appreciated the professionalism and proactiveness of the BPS's press office in organizing the launch, as it afforded him ample opportunity to pre-schedule the event into his news gathering activities:

They don't usually call press conferences for the sake of it ... They tend to know how to present themselves well to the media and this is a 'sexy' subject .... They do give us time for us to do our homework. I would have had [the BPS news release] for at least a week and possibly longer. (Interview with authors)

On the negative side, the agnosticism of the Working Party's message—that false memories might exist, but that they were unlikely to be widespread—did create an element of frustration:

The medical correspondent from the *Times* asked a very pertinent question, at least in journalistic terms. He asked the chairman of the press conference, would you like tomorrow's headlines to say false memory is true or that false memory is false? We all came away understanding how the real world works, but journalistically thinking, 'oh sod it, they've given comfort to both sides'. (Interview with authors)

Ironically, the hostile public response of the British False Memory Society helped to counterbalance this potentially inhibiting factor—adding to the news value of the event, by providing a discordant counterpoint:

Even before the press conference [the BFMS] were saying it was all rubbish and attacking the report, and that in a sense whetted our appetites. (Interview with authors)

However, although this intervention provided a useful spin on the BPS conference, the journalist construed the BFMS in a very different way from
There was also a qualitative difference in the access the two sources had to the journalist. Whereas the journalist spoke to the BPS sources in person and attended the launch, his contact with the BFMS was solely based on their news release. At no stage did he talk to a representative from the organization directly.

These factors clearly suggest the journalist employed a hierarchy of credibility in appraising the contributions of the two organizations. The key issue is whether these judgements influenced his construction of the news report. Interestingly, the journalist insisted they were essentially irrelevant considerations:

My views are totally irrelevant...I tried to report it as accurately as I could in the number of words that were available to me. It's not my job as the journalist in the front line to make value judgements about whether the speakers are right or wrong.

However, closer examination of the text of the article suggests that these credibility assessments did have an impact in several respects. In contradicting the journalist's account on this point we should stress that we are not accusing him of disingenuity or bias. Rather, we are suggesting his professional codes and judgements led him to privilege one stance over another.

The news text

The journalist's claims about the irrelevance of his own views and his 'mirroring' function are supported in one regard. There is an obvious authorial absence in the text, as at no stage does the writer openly convey...
his own views, opinions or evaluations. All commentary in the piece is derived from the protagonistic sources mentioned. This is a well established discursive convention in news reporting.

However, this textual distance does not absolve the journalist of involvement in the 'meaning making' in this instance. By utilizing the news source material, we can see three ways in which 'discretionary power' (Semetko et al., 1991) was exercised.

First, the position of the authors of the BPS report is given far greater priority in the article, in terms of space, location and access. The arguments and evidence of the BPS occupy all but three of the 16 paragraphs in the text, with the objections of the BFMS only being mentioned in the fourth and fifth paragraphs. Furthermore, although the BPS conclusions are quoted and precised in detail, the arguments and evidence of the BFMS are given little or no attention — we are only told that the organization disagrees with the substance of the report.

Second, there is a discernible difference in the 'footing' given to the BPS and the BFMS in the article. 'Footing' is a concept derived from discourse analysis which explores how the content of a message is attributed to a source — e.g. as drawing on professional expertise, or personal experience, or on personal grievance etc. (Edwards and Potter, 1992). The attribution given to the BPS in the article clearly signals its expertise and authority to speak. In paragraph 8, the empirical basis of the report is detailed and in the last paragraph the professional credentials of the Working Party Chair are carefully listed ('Professor John Morton, head of psychology at University College, London and director of the Medical Research Council's cognitive development unit ...'). Significantly, the description of Morton as the 'head of psychology' is both inaccurate and an exaggeration of the authority of his position.

By comparison, the footing given to the BFMS in the article clearly signals the vested interest behind its position ('The False Memory Society, set up with parents claiming they are being wrongly accused by their young adult children, said the report was "deeply disappointing and badly flawed"' [emphasis added]). Not only does the journalist ignore the attempts of the BFMS in its news releases to underline the scientific basis for its criticisms, no indication is given that the only phrase quoted on its behalf ('deeply disappointing and badly flawed') was made by an Emeritus Professor of Psychology from the University of Oxford. Clearly, an opportunity for accreditation was omitted. Third, the interpretative framework of the article most closely corresponds to the communicative agenda of the BPS. The consistent theme emphasized throughout the piece is that although false memory syndrome could exist, there are no grounds for supposing that it is a widespread phenomenon. And, although the False Memory Society appears, its alternative interpretative schema — that the
report is riddled with philosophical and methodological errors, and effectively condones psychotherapeutic malpractice — is only hinted at in the single, decontextualized quote attributed to the society.

There is only one area where the mediation of the event in the text appears to depart from the BPS agenda. This is in the sub-headline: 'Researchers find recovered memories likely to be genuine', which is more categorical in tone than the BPS intended, and which jars with the concluding sentence of the article ('...the working party had deliberately chosen the middle ground because this was where the evidence pointed'). The reason for this contradiction lies in the job-delimitation that is part of all news production. The headline was written by a sub-editor, who also cropped the journalist's original article from 1000 words to 600. However, in the journalist's judgement, this sub-editing did not substantively alter the meaning of the piece, and the sub-heading represented a fair summation of the BPS position.

Key issues

The testimony of the journalist and the textual evidence reveal several additional points about the encoding of this article. First, the journalist's interest in this event was sparked by its consonance within a developing news framework, the status of one of the protagonists, and the general and particular conflict it encapsulated. Second, although both protagonists in the debate are presented in the piece, it is clear that the BPS has a discursive ascendancy, both in relation to the interpretative parameters of the text, and in terms of accreditation. The scientific support for the BFMS position, although strenuously emphasized, was ignored. Third, the outcome of the competition between these sources to define the media agenda was decided by the journalist's professional and social assessments about their motivations and credentials. Fourth, in this example the journalist is clearly a secondary definer. The 'preferred reading' of the article was not created by him, but taken from his most privileged news source. Although he may have been disappointed with the ambivalence of the BPS message, there is no evidence of a translatory effect whereby the message is reworked to fit more readily with professional codes of news presentation. Fifth, and as a partial qualification to the previous points, the presence of the BFMS in the article does represent a tactical coup of sorts. Although journalistic conventions of 'balancing' are well established when reporting on the activities of 'advocates', they are generally less strictly applied with 'arbiters' (Deacon and Golding, 1994: 171–4). It is not inconceivable that had the BFMS not moved to pre-empt the report's release, its views would have been ignored. Certainly, the journalist had not independently canvassed the organization's views prior to the BPS launch.
In summarizing these points, we are conscious that there is a wider dimension to the issue of mediation on this issue than is presented here. We have concentrated on just one example of media reportage, but there were many journalists at the BPS press conference, and there is a history of media interest in the false memory issue. Therefore, we need to be cautious about assuming a wider typicality for this particular example. For example, it does not necessarily follow that the BFMS is always subordinated in media representations. Indeed, there is substantial evidence to the contrary. Although the BPS was generally satisfied with the media reporting of the launch (Tysoe, 1995), it was dismayed at the line taken in a couple of national newspapers. The first was the embargo-busting Sunday Times article (1 January 1995), the second, a piece carried in the Observer the weekend after the conference (‘Incest, Lies and Therapy. Families torn apart by their adult children’s sudden allegations of abuse are fighting back, dismayed by the psychologists’ green light for the technique that they say has caused their suffering’, Observer, 15 January 1995: 23). In both of these examples, it is the BFMS that sets the interpretative agenda. Therefore, we shouldn’t assume that the superior accreditation given to the BPS by this journalist, which was a key factor in securing its definitional advantage, would pertain with all news professionals and in all media arenas. It must be remembered that this news report was written by a specialist journalist, working for an up-market broadsheet, who had a well established exchange-relationship with the BPS press office. In other media contexts there may well be a greater receptiveness to the categorical and alarmist message of the BFMS, and to its attack on the ‘pseudoscientific’ of many areas of psychology. Certainly, although the ‘expertise’ of social scientists is often sought by journalists, it is also acutely vulnerable to their scepticism (Fenton et al., 1995).

Reception: from encoding to decoding

So far we have charted the precise factors that contributed to the encoding of a single news text. On the basis of this evidence, we have identified a preferred reading to the text and its primary definer. It is tempting to assume that this is where the story ends. But of course it is only the beginning. As Eco commented ‘The unity of a text lies in its destination not its origins’ (cited in O’Sullivan et al., 1994: 168). This then raises the question: was the preferred reading taken and was the accreditation inscribed into the text accepted? To address these questions we conducted a series of 14 focus group interviews during which participants were invited to consider a selection of news items and discuss their responses to them. The Guardian article was one of the texts selected.
In our analysis of these groups’ responses we make particular use of a distinction drawn by Corner et al. (1990) between understanding a text (i.e., what the text is seen to be saying) and responding to it (i.e., what the audience member makes of that message). As they explain, how people interpret information and how they evaluate it are not necessarily the same thing.

Understanding

Our reception study shows that there was a great deal of consistency between the groups in their interpretations of the text. Almost every group understood the news item as an assessment of whether or not recovered memory was real or whether it could be false:

RI: They’ve chosen the middle ground because they’re really not sure either way.
R2: There’s no reliable evidence at present is there?
Interviewer: What are the both sides?
R1: Well one that there’s false memory and the other a true memory. But as they can’t really prove it then its sort of gone in the middle. (Women, public sector, up to GCSE)

RI: It’s debating that information can be put into their minds when nothing has actually happened and they believe it.
R2: There’s no evidence.
R3: It leaves you to make up your own mind. It probably does say they are likely to be genuine then at the end he’s saying there is actually no evidence. (Women, private sector, up to GCSE)

Although this basic denotative comprehension was similar for all groups, there were certain areas of confusion. This was partly a facet of the complexity of the concept of a false memory (how can a memory be false?) which seemed to flout rationality for many; partly because of the ambivalence of the message (the inconclusiveness of the BPS report); and partly because of the demands and contradictions of the text itself: a change of direction is recognized within the text — the subtitle begins by saying ‘recovered memory is likely to be genuine’ and the article ends by taking the middle ground:

R2: I couldn’t follow the political flow of this article because the main headline, it says, ‘psychologists are guarded on false memory of abuse’. Then there’s a sub headline which says ‘researchers find recovered memories likely to be genuine’. And it starts off saying people who remember during therapy are likely to be right. They remember something that did happen. And then it switches to no they aren’t. You’ve got the British Psychological Society who don’t really know. I mean right at the end the professor says they have chosen the middle ground. (Men, public sector, up to A Level)
However, despite this confusion, the preferred reading was largely taken:

R1: I mean there's always 'researchers find that recovered memories are likely to be genuine' it's almost as if they felt they had to put that in to explain what they thought the thrust of the article was.
R2: I would tend to believe that they are genuine, memories.
R3: Coming to the end of the article, I had completely forgotten the beginning ... I think I was really struck with what the Professor said ... and I think I was more swayed by what the report said. (Men, private sector with degree)

We have noted that in this instance the text privileged the BPS over the BFMS. In the audience group responses it was clear that this implicit accreditation in the text of the BPS as 'authorised knowers' was also recognized, even if — as we shall see — it wasn't uncritically accepted:

R1: And I must admit I could laugh at this False Memory Society, which I shouldn't do.
R2: ... the British Psychological Society has a named expert which always gives it more credence. Whereas the False Memory Society, they're almost set up to be sitting dollys really aren't they? (Women, public sector, degree)

Response

Whereas understandings of the text were relatively uniform and operated within clearly accepted parameters, responses to the text — i.e. evaluations of the issues and concerns presented — revealed the most dissonance and 'activity' on the part of the audience. Group participants reacted to the article positively, negatively and ambivalently. These responses seemed to draw on five alternative interpretative schemata to appraise the nature of the message and the article's implicit accreditation: personal experience, professional knowledge, political judgements, popular mythology and other media discourses.

The positive response

Individuals' perceptions of the salience of the topic for media coverage often drew on personal experience. Although none of the respondents had any first-hand knowledge with which to appraise the coverage there was considerable personal sensitivity to the issue — what would I do if I was the accuser/accused? Proximity to the issue (real or imagined) is important not least because it is often used to validate interest and inclusion:

R1: I think it was worrying the report because if what it is saying is true that people can remember things that didn't happen and particularly when it's
mentioned things like child abuse and it got through court, that if someone was falsely accused of doing something on the evidence of somebody who gave inaccurate information, it’s like everybody’s nightmare isn’t it? So I think it’s thought provoking really.

R2: Well it’s interesting in so much as it’s everybody’s nightmare. You read about it, you hear about it on television and obviously it’s a worry, that it could happen. (Men, public sector, A-level)

This last quote reveals how many interpretative schemata are informed by other media discourses. Respondents referred frequently to representations of related issues in other news and fictional accounts. Once this mass mediated knowledge had been accumulated it appeared to stimulate further interest.

Positive evaluations of the authority of the main news source — the BPS — were based on professional knowledge of the organization (e.g. from a group of public sector professionals with degrees) and also political judgements about the perceived fairness of reporting of the newspaper from which the article was drawn.

The negative response

Similarly, but with a different outcome, political judgements were made about the possible hidden motives of the news sources, in particular of the BFMS but also of the BPS:

R3: Well lo and behold the British Psychological Society reporting on an issue which is potentially damning to some of its members finds in its evidence that there is little evidence to support the fact that there is abuse by British psychologists during counselling in relation to creating memories. Lack of independence always calls into question the strength of the evidence, I would say. (Men, private sector with degree)

This sense of dubious authority was also precipitated by a popular mythology of ‘the expert’ who by definition of their specialism is out of touch with reality. This was enhanced further by the combined connotations of the stereotype of a professor as an eccentric boffin and that of the psychologist as a hypnotist and mind-bender. The unwillingness to take on board the views of those positioned as experts is explained partly by the interpretative schema that the respondents bring to the text but is founded on the lack of reference to the basis of expertise within the text itself. Respondents felt unable to accept expert opinion because the text did not tell them how qualified the expert was to talk on that subject:

Interviewer: Does it make any difference that you’ve got Professor John Morton talking at the end?
R1: No because half of them are round the bend. To be a professor they’re probably half way there.
Deacon et al., *The natural history of a news item* 23

R2: We don't know what the False Memory Society is, they may have more credibility than this John Morton. (Men, private sector, GCSE)

As well as popular myth and political judgement, a discourse of personal experience can impart scepticism of expertise. On certain occasions anecdotal evidence or even projections of personal experience were pitched against authorized knowledge in the text. Of course interpretative frames do not come into play in the singular as an analysis such as this may suggest. People are always drawing on a variety of overlapping and interconnected means of making sense of texts. An example from this study is the intertwining of professional and personal codes:

R1: I actually work with sexually abused children ... I think if it happens to you you never forget it. And little things will spark it off all the time. So I don't think you can go for many years and think oh, no, I never got slung across a chair and held down and things like that ... awful things, people will go through shock and they'll blank things out but then it does generally come back. I don't think people can go for years and years and just totally block it. (Women, private sector, A level)

The ambivalent response

Again, proximity to the issue was a major factor in evaluating its significance. The area of false memory was viewed by some to be irrelevant to their life. This disinterest was informed by their personal and professional experience:

R1: If it's not related to you or somebody that you know you just pass it over. ... It's not relevant to us, it's a difficult subject, we don't really want to read about.
R2: You go out and repeat something like this without really understanding what it's all about and upset somebody that it could have happened to. I admit I don't understand it. ... It's a field that building society clerks don't really get into.
R3: ... It doesn't affect us so we're not interested in it. (Women, private sector, up to GCSE)

Apart from the frames of reference referred to above there was one other variable that played a part in variation in understanding and response — that of formal education. This was evident at the level of understanding, with conceptual complexities proving problematic for the less formally educated and textual incongruencies readily recognized by the more formally educated as contributing to confusion. Formal education was also relevant at the level of response, particularly in assessments of expertise. The subject of psychology was distrusted by those less formally educated who, because of their lack of personal and/or professional experience of the subject, relied more on the popular association of psychology with images of mind-benders.
Key issues

The study of audience responses reveals a striking consonance in the understanding of the item that suggests the text can inhere meaning by defining the parameters of interpretation. The preferred reading that is encoded is accepted at the moment of decoding. Central to the preferred reading of this particular article is the accreditation of sources. This is recognized and applied by the respondents.

Interpretative variance occurs at the level of comprehension due to the conceptual demands and textual incongruencies of the article. This comprehension relied on educational capital, with conceptual difficulties proving more problematic for those with less formal education. Seen in this way, dissent from the preferred reading is not 'active' and is most certainly not a strategy of resistance. A reinterpretation of the issue was not forthcoming. Rather, and more politically telling, we would argue that such understanding acts as a mechanism of exclusion.

Where renegotiation of meaning does occur it is at the level of response — the evaluative level, i.e. what people make of the validity of the item and the research. Readers may respond by rejecting the accreditation of expertise offered in the text. For example, the BPS is seen by some as a professional image-monger protecting its members' self-interests, rather than as an arbiter. Those who gave the most dissonant evaluations were those with the most detailed knowledge in the area. This would suggest that critical purchase is rooted in personal and professional experience. In this instance, for most of our respondents, such experience was absent or remote. When these pre-existing frames of reference are negligible or non-existent the definitional power of the text is seen to increase.

Approached in this way the notion of the active audience takes on a more defined role. Activity exists for the most part at the level of response once the defining variables of the debate have been set. This activity in turn relies on interpretative resources and the cultural competence available to the individual/group. As Jensen (1990) points out, an oppositional reading is not necessarily a political act in itself. But even to have recourse to a critical response requires access to resources that exist external to the text. These personal, professional and political frames of reference are themselves frequently informed by popular mythology and other discourses from the mass media.

Conclusion

In this article we have traced the 'natural history' of a news item from production through to reception. Our analysis of the encoding of this article highlights the limitations of a media-centric view of news production. By
tracing the response of a news professional to the strategies and discrepant discursive frames of two competing news sources, we have shown how the 'preferred reading' of the text wasn't created by the journalist, but constituted by the source given most privileged access (i.e. the British Psychological Society). This is a point that is often lost in analyses of news that are entirely dependent upon textual analysis and which seem to imply that textual closure occurs at the moment of production (e.g. Fiske, 1987: 281–308). In this instance, the journalist's 'textualization' of the false memory issue essentially involved selecting material from an already tightly crafted message, and adding a brief and unelaborated counterpoint from a second critical source. Of course, this represents a critically important mediation in the encoding process, but it isn't a creative intervention. The journalist constricted rather than constructed the debate on this issue.

The British Psychological Society achieved this primary definition partly on the basis of its perceived social status. This would appear to confirm a rather static and deterministic view of the news production process, in which the powerful always prevail. But the detail of our study also shows how the accreditation of the BPS critically depended upon the adroitness of its news management, both in the short term (by carefully adapting the nature, timing and presentation of its message to fit with media logic) and in the long term (in cultivating an exchange-relationship with the journalist). Indeed, despite all this careful preplanning, the discursive control of the BPS was threatened by the responsive strategies of the British False Memory Society, who exploited internal tensions within the BPS to preempt its launch and repudiate the detail of its message. Although the BFMS was only marginally successful in this instance in changing the terms of the text, its mere presence was an achievement of sorts. Moreover, there is substantial circumstantial evidence to suggest that its agenda-building efforts met with more success in other reporting contexts.

If we need to avoid deterministic accounts of the relationship between the media and society-as-source, we should also be cautious about assuming, on the basis of this case study, that journalists always adopt the role of secondary definer. It should be remembered that while media interest in the false memory issue was well established prior to the BPS news conference, it remained a comparatively 'new' issue on the media map. Furthermore, it is an innately uncertain and immensely controversial topic. These are conditions where the need for 'arbiters' to help 'make things mean' is most keenly felt by journalists and are therefore most conducive to source dependency (Deacon and Golding, 1994: 184–7) — particularly when the mediator is a conscientious and experienced specialist correspondent motivated by informational, non-revenue, prestige goals rather than the slavish pursuit of a good news-angle. It is not difficult to think of other situations where this interpretative dependency will not be as
great and news professionals would play a more active role in constructing the 'preferred reading' of a text, whether deliberately, in seeking to push a particular political line, or unconsciously, in appraising source actions and opinions in terms of a well established set of cognitive assumptions about what the issue or event 'means' in a broader sense.

With regard to the decoding of this news text, our research adds further support to those who argue there are dangers in overstating the interpretative freedom of the audience from textual confines (e.g. Murdock, 1989). The details reveal a marked consistency between intended meaning at the point of production and audience understanding and interpretation of the text. This is not to say that audience members passively deferred to the text — on the contrary, we found substantial evidence of independent thought and scepticism. However, the 'distinctiveness of decoding' in this instance occurred at the evaluative rather than interpretative level. Resistance to the message did not lead to a renegotiation of it. It was interrogated but not expanded.

We would suggest there are two reasons for this interpretative closure. The first relates to the genre of the text being analysed. Hard news reporting is governed by a range of mechanistic, narrative conventions that are intended to generate a denotative transparency to inhibit potential readings. For example, it is a genre where prominence and frequency of appearance are reliable indications of significance and signification. Most news-consumers are conversant with the maxims of this presentational game, and construct their readings according to them. Of course, aberrant decodings can and do occur, but the undeniable fact that news is a peculiarly 'closed' form of actuality coverage inevitably means its polysemic potential is circumscribed. There is none of the interpretative room to manoeuvre that is such an evident and essential facet of other forms of fictional and factual genres. It is surely no accident that the most convincing demonstrations of audience creativity and autonomy appear in studies of popular narrative genres (such as soap operas), which are sought out for recreational rather than surveillance purposes, and which revolve around textual ambiguity and irresolution.

The second reason for this interpretative closure relates to the nature of the subject matter being reported. The selected news report is about a remote and esoteric issue which, although its broader implications resonate with the audience, remains beyond their direct personal and professional experiences. This is a situation most conducive to the acceptance of media definitions, if not uncritically, then at least interpretatively intact. This is a recurrent theme in many branches of audience research — including reception analysis, cultivation analysis, agenda-setting and uses and gratifications — which all highlight how peripheral engagement and involvement with issues increase acceptance of media versions of reality (Morley, 1980; Iyengar et al., 1982; Hietbrink, 1996).
It is our belief that the obvious parallels revealed in this case study between the text dependency of the audience and the source dependency of the journalist highlight the value of considering the linkages between encoding and decoding. In this example audience responses and journalistic mediation are similarly constrained by their negligible access to alternative repertoires of discourse and experience about the false memory issue. And although this doesn’t render them completely passive, it does mean their activity operates in evaluative rather than interpretative terms. Obviously, these conditions do not always pertain. Other issues and topics are embedded in popular culture and media culture in far more extensive ways, and on these occasions the interpretative activity of the mediator and recipient is likely to be greater and the influence of news sources more likely to be subordinated to these established inferential frameworks.

This recognition of the contingent nature of audience, source and media activity suggests that more rigorous theorization is needed of the differing nature and contexts of communication events. Although we do not have space here to develop such a framework, we believe it should distinguish clearly between actuality and fictional forms, between popular culture and public knowledge contexts (Corner, 1991), and pay closer consideration to issues of genre, personal identification and proximity. In particular, it should insert a sense of chronology into analyses of reception and production, in which the dynamics of understanding and interpretation are recognized as historically located processes rather than synchronous events.

Appendix: The Guardian 13 January 1995

Psychologists guarded on ‘false memory’ of abuse

Researchers find recovered memories likely to be genuine

FALSE memory syndrome — where adults wrongly ‘remember’ during therapy that they were sexually abused as children — is possible but unlikely, the British Psychological Society said yesterday.

A report by the society says that recovered memories are likely to be genuine. But it is possible that authoritarian therapists could convince people to believe things which never happened.

The False Memory Society, set up with parents claiming they are being wrongly accused by their young adult children, said the report was ‘deeply disappointing and badly flawed’.

It is claimed that doctrinaire therapists tell clients that forgotten abuse is the cause of their adult psychological distress, and help create ‘false memories’ of this happening when the people were young.

The opposing view is that most cases of child abuse are genuine and that in the course of therapy it is possible for suppressed memories to be recalled.

The British Psychological Society set up a working party last year to examine the issue, and its report published yesterday will give some comfort to both sides.

It examined existing theories and research, as well as obtaining the views of some 800 psychologists, many of whom treat survivors of child sexual abuse. The
researchers also examined the files of the British False Memory Society, looking in detail at 97 cases. The report states: 'Complete or partial memory loss is a frequently reported consequence of experiencing certain kinds of psychological traumas, including childhood sexual abuse. These memories are sometimes fully or partially recovered after a gap of many years.'

It adds: 'Memories may be recovered within, or independent of, therapy. Memory recovery is reported by highly experienced and well qualified therapists who are well aware of the dangers of inappropriate suggestion and interpretation.'

The report says normal memories can be broadly accurate but contain significant errors. Recovered memories are likely to have the same properties.

It adds: 'Sustained pressure or persuasion by an authority figure could lead to the retrieval or elaboration of "memories" of events that never actually happened. The possibility of therapists creating in their clients false memories of having been sexually abused in childhood warrants careful consideration.'

'There is no reliable evidence at present that this is a widespread phenomenon in the UK.'

The report lays down guidelines for therapists, reminding them that they should be alert to the dangers of suggestion.

Professor John Morton, head of psychology at University College, London, and director of the Medical Research Council's cognitive development unit, said the working party had deliberately chosen the middle ground because this was where the evidence pointed.

Notes

1. The research has been funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (grant reference R000234705).
2. These categories reflect levels of formal educational achievement in England. GCSE exams (General Certificate of Secondary Education) are usually taken by students at age 16; A-Levels (advanced level) are usually taken by students at age 18; higher education refers to any formal education over and above these levels.
3. The organization now has charitable status and a 'scientific and professional advisory board' of 16 academic and professional members, eight of whom are Professors of Psychology.
4. Keyword searches of CDROM archives of the Guardian and Daily/Sunday Telegraph revealed no mention anywhere of 'false memory' (as used in this context) during the whole of 1992. In 1993 there was a string of articles.
5. In 1993, a freelance working for the paper tried to write '. . . a balanced article, explaining the views of the proponents of FMS, while leaving no one in any doubt that child abuse is endemic in society' (Guardian, 7 June 1993: 12). The article, 'Past Imperfect' (Guardian, 12 May 1993: 10), excited a storm of discussion from readers, with some accusing the author of conspiring with those who wish to silence women's anger about their abuse.

References

Deacon et al., *The natural history of a news item* 29


Fenton, N., D. Deacon and A. Bryman (1995) 'Social Science, the Media and the Public Sphere', paper presented at the European Sociological Association Conference, Budapest.


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Collision or collusion? A discussion and case study of the unplanned triangulation of quantitative and qualitative research methods

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In recent years there has been a growth of interest in breaking down the divisions between qualitative and quantitative research. However, although examples of multi-method studies now abound, there has been little discussion within the literature about the empirical and theoretical challenges that such eclecticism can pose. This article provides an example of a multi-method investigation into social scientists and their media relations wherein qualitative and quantitative findings appeared to contradict each other, and describes how the authors sought to explain and accommodate these discrepancies. Using this case study, they argue that it is incumbent on all researchers committed to the integration of research methods to deal with any differences that may emerge, rather than to resort to selective, epistemic prioritization as a get-out clause.

Introduction

In spite of a feeling in some quarters that the distinction between quantitative and qualitative research has passed its proverbial 'sell-by' date, its use and prominence in discussions of social research methodology show few signs of abating. Indeed, if anything, the salience of the distinction seems to be increasing (Bryman 1998). Moreover, a growing number of researchers seem to be incorporating elements of both traditions in their research designs. It is the integration of quantitative and qualitative research that forms the focus of interest for this article.

Combining quantitative and qualitative research

A number of writers have sought to enumerate the different ways in which quantitative and qualitative research can be combined. Bryman (1988) lists 11 different modes of integration. Hammersley (1996) essentially groups these into three different forms: triangulation (which is one of Bryman's types); facilitation (which combines Bryman's 'qualitative research facilitates quantitative research' and 'quantitative research facilitates qualitative research'); and complementarity (which encapsulates the rest of Bryman's types).
Triangulation is one of the most common ways in which the integration of quantitative and qualitative research is conceptualized, to the extent that some writers treat integration and triangulation as essentially synonymous (Sechrest and Sidani 1995) or portray it as the main way in which integration is possible. While acknowledging a number of ways in which quantitative and qualitative research can be combined, for example, Tarrow describes triangulation as the research strategy that 'best embodies the strategy of combining quantitative and qualitative methods' (1995: 473). By triangulation, writers typically follow Webb et al. (1966) in suggesting that findings generated by one method can be validated by checking them against findings generated by another method. The term was employed by Webb et al. as an approach to the measurement process, whereby greater confidence in findings is achieved as a result of different measurement processes being used to investigate a hypothesis. Many writers have stretched the notion of triangulation to cover the cross-checking of findings through the use of both quantitative and qualitative research.

A feature of much writing on combining quantitative and qualitative research, and work on the strategy of triangulation is by no means an exception to this, is that the outcomes, at least in general terms, are planned and intentional. Of course, researchers do decide to employ quantitative and qualitative research in tandem with clear notions in mind of why it may be useful to do so, but they cannot plan the outcomes of the comparisons between their quantitative and their qualitative findings (Bryman 1992: 67-8). We are used to recognizing from insider accounts contained in collections such as Hammond (1964) and Bell and Newby (1977) that research is frequently a lot more messy and a lot less linear than is often apparent from research methods texts and from articles in academic journals, and that the outcomes of research are often different from those envisaged at the outset of a research design. But the significance and implications of this have not been considered to any great extent to the case of combined investigations.

This is rather strange, as it should be anticipated that the outcomes of the integration of quantitative and qualitative research may be unexpected. Proponents of qualitative research invariably recommend that the approach should be as open and as unstructured as possible so that the focus of the investigation is as uncontaminated by prior conceptions as possible. This stance opens up the possibility, and indeed the likelihood, of findings having unexpected contours. It would not be surprising, therefore, if the impact and significance of combining quantitative and qualitative research findings are not quite what was anticipated. Moreover, all this should not be taken to imply that quantitative research lacks the capacity to surprise and to generate the unexpected. In other words, there is considerable potential for the combination of quantitative and qualitative research having unanticipated outcomes. This may ostensibly be particularly relevant to the issue of triangulation. As Smith notes in the context of writing about quantitative and qualitative approaches to evaluation research: 'Attempts to triangulate findings of multimethod studies may either be planned in advance . . . or post hoc and fortuitous' (1986: 42). This point will be a particularly central focus of this article in which we examine a number of cases in which there
was a clash between data deriving from different methods which could be interpreted as a failure to triangulate (i.e. a clash of findings), even though none of these cases was underpinned by a triangulation strategy in the sense envisaged by Webb et al. (1966).

When the results of the triangulation of quantitative and qualitative research is reported, researchers frequently do not make explicit whether the exercise was planned. Indeed, in many of the published cases reported in this paper, it is difficult to establish with any certainty whether or not triangulation was planned. Regardless of whether triangulation is planned or not, the issue arises of how to handle instances in which there is a clear inconsistency between data deriving from quantitative and qualitative research. The least satisfactory way of dealing with such an occurrence is arbitrarily to plump for one set of findings at the expense of the other. As an illustration of this tendency, Bryman (1988: 132–3) cites Shapiro's (1973) study of the Follow Through (FT) programme that had been introduced into some US schools. This programme aimed to broaden the educational process in such a way as to enhance the quality of interaction between teachers and pupils and between pupils. In line with the principles of experimentation in quantitative research, Shapiro compared FT with non-FT schools using test scores. She failed to discern statistically significant differences. Shapiro also conducted qualitative research based on observation and found clear differences between the two types of school. She then explained the divergence between the two sets of results in terms of deficiencies in her quantitative research design. In this case, there is a clear privileging and uncritical acceptance of the qualitative findings. Nor is this an isolated case: Newby noted in connection with his research on Suffolk farm workers that when his survey and participant observation findings conflicted he 'instinctively trusted the latter' (Newby 1977: 127). Presumably, the epistemic priority being accorded qualitative research here arises out of the tendency for many researchers to feel that the resulting data are richer than quantitative findings. Also, the researcher's closeness to his or her subjects can lead to an impression of greater inherent validity than with quantitative findings. The fact that many quantitative researchers might prefer to privilege the quantitative findings, perhaps because of their greater perceived rigour and generalizability (e.g. Araya 1995, Hartnoll 1995), is given scant attention. There may be situations in which it is possible to establish whether one set of findings is definitely wrong or at least misleading. Weinholz et al. (1995) refer to a study of teaching by university hospital physicians in which a mistake was discovered in the processing of quantitative data when qualitative data, which had also been collected, were examined. However, in this case the quantitative data were incontrovertibly wrong, so this is not an instance of an arbitrary prioritizing of one type of data over another.

Of course, there are also many cases of mutual corroboration of quantitative and qualitative research. Indeed, since it is important to consider potentially unplanned instances in which there might be a clash between the two (that is, combined research aimed at what Hammersley (1996) calls facilitation or complementarity), it is almost surprising that there are not more reported cases of clashes of findings, particularly since
there seems to have been a growth in combined research designs in the last five or so years. This is an important point because it implies that we should be cautious about the possibility of over-generalizing from a small number of triangulation exercises in which the quantitative and qualitative research findings clashed, no matter how well known or spectacular they might be.

There are numerous cases of corroboration of quantitative and qualitative research, whether planned or unplanned. In their report of research on young people's alcohol consumption, Hughes et al. (1997) present a picture of considerable similarity between their structured interview and self-administered questionnaire research on the one hand and their focus group discussions on the other. Carlson et al. (1996) note that their own and others' ethnographic evidence concerning needle sharing among drug addicts had led to the surprising conclusion that it was not a valued activity. These findings were incorporated into a self-administered questionnaire that was given to drug users and a highly congruent picture emerged. Hugentobler et al. (1992) used a number of qualitative research techniques (focus groups, observation, in-depth interviews) and self-administered questionnaires to examine stress and health at work in the context of an action research project. In addition to being interested in the ways in which the different data might dovetail to provide a more complete overall picture, they explored the issue of triangulation and found broad convergence surrounding such issues as sources of stress in the organization. Nevertheless, although these and many other studies report a high level of convergence, or at least do not report divergence, there is considerable potential for clashes between quantitative and qualitative research.

A case study of unplanned triangulation

In the previous section the emphasis was upon triangulation in relation to the integration of quantitative and qualitative research. This was not meant to imply that triangulation is somehow a more significant aspect of integration than the other forms, but to draw attention to the potential significance of the distinction between planned and unplanned triangulation. Unplanned triangulation occurs whenever the researcher seeks to combine quantitative and qualitative research in a spirit of facilitation or, perhaps more particularly, complementarity but finds that the results from the two research strategies can be compared and therefore offer the opportunity for a triangulation exercise. When this happens, as with planned triangulation, the results may corroborate each other or may clash. Unplanned but failed triangulation (in which there is a lack of mutual corroboration) may be more disconcerting for the researcher than planned triangulation that fails to provide mutual corroboration. In the former instance, the researcher may not have contemplated the possibility of a clash between sets of findings. The question then becomes one of considering how to deal with the clash.

The rest of this article is concerned to describe several cases of unplanned triangulation and our reflections upon these instances. The focus for the research was an investigation of the representation of social science research
in the British mass media (see Fenton et al., 1998). The investigation comprised a number of different data collection exercises. Only those components that are germane to our discussion are set out in table 1, but the overall research programme extended further than these areas. (Additionally, 27 semi-structured interviews were conducted with representatives from institutions that host and fund social science research in the UK, and 14 focus discussion groups were held with members of the public.)

Overall, the project entailed the use of three quantitative research elements (table 1, rows 1–3) and six qualitative research ones (table 1, rows 4–6). The purpose of this mix was to attain as comprehensive a picture of our domain of interest as possible and to achieve a fit between the issues we were interested in and an appropriate method. There is only one instance in which similar or the same respondents were being researched through both a quantitative and a qualitative method: some social scientists who had received coverage in the media (as identified in the content analysis) both answered a mail questionnaire and were interviewed (see table 1, rows 2 and 4). However, triangulation was not the object of this strategy; instead it was felt that social scientists' feelings about coverage of their work in the media constituted a particularly important area and that the qualitative data would be helpful in allowing us to elaborate our quantitative findings.

Mediating social science: trends and contradictions

When analysis began of material from the various strands of the project it became clear the research had not only generated a welter of evidence, but also several potentially contradictory indications about the nature of the exchange relationship between social scientists and the mainstream news media.

In most of the limited literature on the mass mediation of social science there is an implicit assumption that the interaction between these two professional cultures is most typically characterized by conflict. This impression comes through very clearly in detailed case studies of social scientists' media interaction (e.g. Haslam and Bryman, 1994) and substantial evidence emerged as the research progressed that supported this view, mainly from qualitative evidence.

Several key themes stood out from the interviews with journalists on this issue (table 1, row 5). The first was that social scientists and their research were only seen to have an associative rather than intrinsic news value (unlike the natural sciences which commonly have their own designated specialist correspondents). For most journalists we interviewed, the newsworthiness and usefulness of social scientists as news sources depended on their proximity to either topical issues in the media domain, or issues assumed to be of perennial public interest (e.g. love, sex, death, money, etc.). In other words, social scientists were predominantly used as agenda-followers rather than as agenda-setters:

Often I go to the news-desk and say that there's a good report coming out tomorrow on this. The reason why I call it a good report may have more to do with topicality rather than me necessarily
judging it in terms of being a particularly wonderful piece of social science research. (Broadsheet journalist)

If somebody came to me now and said I’ve got evidence which shows that young people might be led into committing murder by watching violent videos, I might be interested. But I’d have been a darn sight more interested if they’d made that call the day after the James Bulger trial. (Tabloid journalist)

One of the main reasons for this marginal importance appeared to be journalists’ uncertainty about the status and authoritativeness of social scientific knowledge and expertise compared with lay perspectives (not least, their own). Whatever distinctions exist between the professional values and practices of social scientists and journalists, there is considerable overlap in their subject areas. Consequently, unlike the often arcane complexities of the natural sciences which defy independent media appraisal, journalists feel well positioned to evaluate social scientific knowledge by drawing on their own profession and personal experiences. This creates the potential for conflict in two regards. On the one hand, the journalists scorned research that in their eyes ‘proved the obvious’ (particularly when large amounts of public funds were involved). On the other, many disdained work that challenged or rejected their well-established frames and precepts about particular issues or topics. From these comments, it seemed clear that social scientists have to negotiate a tricky path in their media dealings, being constantly at risk of censure for appearing too commonsensical or too counter-intuitive:

A large bulk of the research often tells me what I already know… People often say ‘why have they spent two years researching that—when everybody knows it—at a cost of five million pounds?’ (Tabloid journalist)

This impression of conflict and tension was corroborated by key themes in the social scientist interviews (see table 1, row 4). Although attitudes varied as to the importance of establishing media contact and cultivating good media relations, all interviewees at some stage voiced suspicions about journalistic motives, frustration with the way news formats tended to simplify or spuriously amplify research findings and issues, and a general uncertainty about whether the benefits of media exposure outweighed the risks of a media mauling:

I have become somewhat cynical about the way the media picks up research. With one or two exceptions, coverage is distorted, out of context, focusing on the sexy aspects of the research while neglecting huge swaths of the rest, often extremely political/partisan, inaccurate (often getting simple details wrong), while at the same time unquestioning of the figures… However, I am not in a position to avoid press coverage and I think it is researchers’ responsibility to put out information in the context of all its strengths and limitations. (Social scientist)

Almost all interviewees had a ‘war story’ to relate, whether based on personal experience or that of a close acquaintance, where media coverage had caused serious embarrassment, irritation or professional difficulties. These salutary tales seemed to illustrate essential and irreconcilable tensions that divide these two professional cultures. However, when evidence from other components of the research project were analysed, this model of inherent conflict became less than completely convincing.
Significantly, all of these challenges came from quantitative aspects of the study.

Among the findings to emerge from the content analysis of media coverage of social scientists and their research (table 1, row 1), two clearly stood out. The first was simply that there was not very much social science reported in the mainstream British media, whether in terms of research presentation or in the use of social scientists as pundits on public matters. Although the total number of 592 items may seem considerable, it needs to be borne in mind that this total is derived from an extensive sample of broadcast and print media taken over a composite 81-day sample. Even the media outlet found to have had the most social science related coverage (*The Guardian* newspaper), averaged only 1.7 such items per edition. Taken in isolation, these findings fit quite logically alongside the themes revealed through the journalist and social scientist interviews—the marginal presence being a product of the conflict and antagonism felt on both sides about their exchange relationship. However, a second key finding did not fit so comfortably within this framework.

One of the major tasks of the content analysis was to gain some measure of the hostility or support towards social scientific knowledge articulated within mainstream media coverage. To do this we coded the number of social science related items which contained some degree of commentary about social scientists or their research (whether neutral, positive or negative). We interpreted ‘commentary’ in very broad terms. For example, it could either be a specific editorial comment made by the journalist within the text or the reported comments of an ‘accessed voice’ (e.g. an enthusiastic politician or a sceptical member of the public). Furthermore, the comments could either specifically relate to social scientists and/or their research, or could address broader questions about the value and validity of the social sciences *per se* and/or of specific disciplines. Despite this very inclusive definition, the content analysis found few instances of media commentary about social scientific evidence or expertise, whether negative or positive. Only a fifth of items contained any form of commentary, of which a higher proportion was positive rather than negative (45%: 40%).

This clearly suggests that journalistic scepticism about the social sciences, however readily and vehemently expressed in interviews, is infrequently articulated in coverage. Indeed, the findings imply that when social scientific research is reported its authority is most typically unquestioned, even deferred to, and that when social scientists appear they are most typically presented as ‘arbiters’ of public issues—objective, dispassionate, informed—rather than as ‘advocates’ whose views are inevitably coloured by the vested interests they represent.

Further apparent contradictions with the interview themes emerged from the two questionnaire sample surveys of social scientists and their media use (see table 1, rows 2 and 3). As explained, the first survey was directly linked to the content analysis and involved asking those social scientists who were found to have had coverage of their research to explain how the specific media interaction identified had occurred and their opinions on the outcome. A large majority of respondents (75%) indicated satisfaction with the accuracy of the identified report and the journalist’s interpretation of
Table 1. Social scientists and the British news media: methodological details

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Sampling</th>
<th>Response rate and other details</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Quantitative</td>
<td>Mainstream news and current affairs coverage of social scientists and/or</td>
<td>A random, rolling sample of 81 days, coverage was taken between 26/5/94 and 31/3/95. The mainstream media sampled were: 12 daily and weekly national newspapers (six broadsheet and six tabloid); four daily and weekly local/regional newspapers from local sample areas (Nottingham and Manchester); five national ‘lifestyle’ magazines; nine national TV news programmes (covering all terrestrial television channels broadcasting at the time); four local TV evening news programmes; six weekly investigative journalism/social reportage national television programmes; five weekly/daily television talk shows/magazine programmes; all prime time ad hoc television programmes deemed relevant and broadcast on sample days; one national radio new programme per day on BBC Radio 4 and Radio 5 live; nine national BBC Radio 4 investigative journalism/social reportage/studio talk shows and magazine programmes; one BBC and ILR local radio news programme per day in the two local sample regions; local radio current affairs programmes on BBC GMR Talkback.</td>
<td>The content analysis identified 592 news/current affairs items which included coverage of social scientists and/or social science research. ('An item' being either a news/feature article, letter, editorial, or programme segment.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>content analysis</td>
<td>social research</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Mail</td>
<td>Social scientists’ experiences with, and perceptions of, media reporting</td>
<td>A questionnaire was sent to every social scientist identified in the quantitative content analysis found to be presenting research in a news/feature item or programme. The sampling employed a technique of rolling exclusion. Once a social scientist had been sent a questionnaire, they were automatically excluded from any subsequent mailing.</td>
<td>151 questionnaires were sent out to social scientists between May 1994 and March 1995. 123 usable responses were received, constituting an 81% response rate.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>questionnaire</td>
<td>of their research</td>
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<td>survey</td>
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<td>3. Mail</td>
<td>Social scientists’ experiences with, and perceptions of, media reporting</td>
<td>The sample frame included social scientists working in academic, governmental and applied research contexts in England. All university departments that could be categorized under one of seven social science subject areas (sociology, psychology, economics, political science, business and management, social policy and ‘miscellaneous’) were stratified by res-</td>
<td>1139 questionnaires were sent to social scientists between October 1994 and January 1995. 674 usable responses were received, constituting a 62% response rate.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>questionnaire</td>
<td>of their work</td>
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<td>survey</td>
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4. Semi-structured interviews

Social scientists' experiences with, and perceptions of, media reporting of their work

Twenty social scientists were purposively selected from the first survey responses according to two criteria. The first was that interviewees should come from a range of institutions (academic, applied, governmental). Secondly, we wanted to be able to compare those with very high levels of media exposure with those who had less frequent contact.

5. Semi-structured interviews

Journalists' perceptions of social scientists and social science research

A quota sample of 34 journalists were selected from those identified from the quantitative content analysis. The quotas covered all sections of the national and local media sampled in the media analysis.

6. Participant Observation

Journalists' interactions with social scientists at academic conferences

Journalists were 'tracked' (with their consent) throughout their attendance at three academic conferences. Researchers observed them at all the news conferences and sessions they attended, and in their interactions with other journalists present.

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<th>Method</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4. Semi-structured interviews</td>
<td>Social scientists' experiences with, and perceptions of, media reporting of their work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Semi-structured interviews</td>
<td>Journalists' perceptions of social scientists and social science research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Participant Observation</td>
<td>Journalists' interactions with social scientists at academic conferences</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All interviews were transcribed and analysed thematically, using the NUDIST software analysis package.

All interviews were transcribed and analysed thematically, using the NUDIST software analysis package.

Journalists were observed for two working days at each conference.
the most salient conclusions of their research. Although the majority said they had noted some omission of detail in the media item (53%), only 6% said they felt this omission had seriously compromised or confused the principal research conclusions.

If the content analysis results challenge the assumption that social scientists are routinely exposed to open media derision in coverage, the survey’s findings suggest that the media do not habitually misrepresent or misinterpret research conclusions when they report them—despite the prominence of this complaint in the social scientist interviews. When asked to comment in specific rather than abstract terms, most social scientists express broad satisfaction with media performance (see Fenton et al. 1998: 71–2).

The second survey (table 1, row 3), based on a stratified random sampling of social scientists working in a range of institutional contexts, both allowed us to widen our empirical net to include social scientists who had not received media attention and to appraise the validity of the first survey’s findings. On the latter point we found clear consistency between the two surveys. For example, the motives given by social scientists for seeking media attention were almost identical in their pattern of prioritization. In both surveys, the main promotional motivation concerned the dissemination of research work (rather than personal or institutional aggrandisement) and this vied for prominence with the general issue motivation of ‘raising awareness and informing public debate’ (see Fenton et al. 1998: 74). Significantly, this oblique, long-term motivation was far more frequently cited than more focused, reactive political motives for seeking media coverage. For example, only 1% of respondents in both surveys saw their main reason for having media contact as being ‘to react to events and political developments’.

It is important to appreciate how closely these findings accord with those of the content analysis which suggested that when social scientists are featured in coverage, they are more frequently presented in a signalling role—highlighting issues for debate rather than directly engaging in the rough-and-tumble of partisan political debate. What this further evidence shows is that this type of media role-casting reflects the expressed preferences of the sources. If journalists tend to use social scientists as ‘arbiters’ on new and uncertain issues, then this is also the role that social scientists tend to be most comfortable with. Again, this suggests symbiotic dimensions to these exchange relationships that did not clearly emerge in either source or journalist interviews.

The conflict model of media–social scientist interaction was also challenged by the responses of social scientists who had received no media contact. Here the results suggested that media absence is more due to work pressures and uncertainties about the practical benefits of receiving media attention rather than any active aversion or antipathy towards journalists. Essentially, these respondents typically ignored rather than avoided the media spotlight. Only 14% said they avoided the media because they feared being misquoted or misrepresented.

Collectively, therefore, qualitative and quantitative components of the research seemed to suggest inconsistent conclusions about the typical
character of media–social scientist interactions. Whereas the former pointed to a collision of values and approaches, the latter suggested a more collusive relationship. One of the key analytical questions that confronted us in the research was to decide how to reconcile these inferences.

Dealing with differences

As discussed earlier, an approach often adopted in such situations is to prioritize one form of evidence over the other (e.g. Patton 1975). However, we were unable to discern any clear basis for such a selection, as there were no obvious reasons for questioning the reliability and validity of the different research evidence on their own terms. The journalists and social scientists offered their opinions freely without any concerted prompting from the interviewer, and had nothing obvious to gain by completely misrepresenting their views and experiences. The content analysis was conducted with thoroughness and care, and the high response rates to both questionnaire surveys suggested they addressed matters on which respondents were both willing and able to comment. Where there are no grounds to query the internal robustness of particular strands of evidence, the only way to privilege certain findings over others is to resort to epistemic prioritization, e.g. that large-scale random samples inevitably have a greater validity than smaller, purposively selected samples, or that quantitative methods always obscure rather than reveal the complexities and contradictions of social life. In our view, deploying such preferences is a particularly unsatisfactory way of resolving the impasse, not least because to do so would demonstrate a basic intellectual inconsistency. There is no point in developing a multi-method approach if the researcher resorts to methodological purism at the first sign of trouble.

For this reason we decided a more productive analytical approach would be to accept the respective internal validity of different sources of evidence, and attempt to elaborate an explanation of media/social scientist interaction that could accommodate their apparent tensions. A key facet of this strategy involved re-analysing the evidence from different research components, in the light of the apparently competing accounts, to see whether certain elements or clues had been overlooked in the initial analysis that might help explain the contradictions.

Re-appraising social scientist–journalist relations

The first issue we confronted was to find some way of explaining the general satisfaction with media performance revealed in the first survey, with the frequent criticisms voiced in the social scientist interviews. When we looked again at the interviewees' comments, it became clear that they weren't claiming that their 'war stories' about media misrepresentation or attack were the most common outcome of their media dealings, rather they were highlighting them as the most memorable and significant. In this respect, these experiences have a qualitative rather than quantitative
importance: the mistakes made in one bruising media encounter resonate long after the event and tend to foster careful circumspection in all subsequent interactions. Additionally, most interviewees understood the pressures that direct and constrain news production (time pressures, word limitations, audience considerations, etc.) and consequently had modest, even cynical, expectations of what could be expected of the media when reporting their work (or social science issues in general).

The key point here is that this general mix of residual suspicion and low expectation (revealed in the social science interviews) seems to operate on a different level from specific evaluations of selected examples of coverage (addressed in the first survey). Indeed, rather than being mutually contradictory, the general perceptions seem to offer the framework within which particular assessments are made, and in some respects may well foster the mainly positive responses given to specifically identified news reports (see table 1, row 1). People who fear the worst and expect little are particularly vulnerable to pleasant surprises, and it seems likely that, to some degree, the general satisfaction revealed by the survey is as indicative of relief as it is of unbridled enthusiasm.

A further explanation of the disparity probably lies in the different types of interactions that occur between social scientists and journalists. Looking again at the social scientists' interviews (see table 1, row 4), it became clear that the media interactions that created greatest unease, and which had caused greatest past difficulties, were reactive exchanges where contact was initiated by the media. Most commonly these were occasions where social scientists were asked to act as pundits on public matters.

Difficulties with this sort of contact seemed to be caused by several factors. Firstly, when these interactions are unanticipated (as they often are), they present less opportunity for social scientists to organize their thoughts, prepare comments and think through the implications of their responses. As such, they are inherently more risky than planned media encounters, and are forever tinged with the possibility that something may be said in haste and repented at leisure. Secondly, on these occasions journalists are far more likely to have their own preconceived angle on an issue and frequently only seek social scientific expertise to corroborate these prejudgements. Many interviewees found these occasions particularly frustrating—offering little opportunity to challenge or develop the journalists' framework, and often resulting in them apparently supporting arguments they didn't agree with. Thirdly, on some occasions there is a poor match between the particular expertise of the social scientist and the subject(s) upon which they are asked to comment. This again fosters unease: because social scientists are conscious that their comments may be ill informed, and because once comments are made they are sometimes given an unwarranted credence. (Several interviewees cited occasions where passing comments made to a journalist, which were little more than best guesses in the circumstances, were subsequently trumpeted in media reports as definitive and authoritative statements.) Finally, pundit appearances tend to make the greatest personal demands on social scientists. Unlike research dissemination exchanges, where the source has a clear message to tell (and sell), 'plausible punditry' depends as much on
quick wits, presentational nous and self belief, as it does on specialized knowledge.

For all these reasons, interviewees preferred media interactions where they made the first move, where they had a clear reason for seeking publicity, knew what they wanted to say, could target their message to the most trusted and receptive media outlets, and could draw on in-house public relations to prepare their message for media consumption and preempt possible misinterpretations. These occasions most typically involved the dissemination of research. The crucial point here is that such preparatory work not only affords some initial control over the terms of the media encounter, it is also the stage at which much of the transformation of social scientific knowledge into media logic occurs. This is, of course, a feature of all news source activity, where, as Ericson et al. (1989: 6) point out: 'It is reasonable to argue that the real reporters are source spokespersons, who do all the essential 'signwork' . . . within their organization in order to produce an acceptable news account'.

The reason for highlighting this preference among many social scientists for proactive, research presentation rather than punditry roles is that it offers a further explanation for the differences between the media-derived survey results and the interview themes. The survey only contacted social scientists who were found to be presenting research in coverage, and therefore systematically privileged the less problematic kind of media encounter. Furthermore, it is highly likely that in many cases respondents were not appraising the fit between the finer detail of their research and its media reporting, but rather the degree of similarity between their preliminary mediation of the research—as distilled into news releases, report summaries, etc.—and the second mediation that occurred in the news production process. This interpretation is supported by the fact that most of the 'war stories' relating to media reporting of research mentioned in interviews, concerned occasions when the social scientists had failed to 'get their mediation in first', either because their PR preparations had proved inadequate, or had been compromised by the inadvertent leaking of research findings before the researchers felt ready to go public.

The other key contradiction we sought to explain was why the cynicism voiced by many journalists in interviews about the social sciences both rarely finds expression in coverage, and doesn't discourage deferential treatment of social scientists and research when they do appear. In our judgement, the reasons for this are twofold. The first is that journalists' reservations about the status and authority of social scientific knowledge is expressed mainly through neglect rather than open attack. Generally, a critique by exclusion seems to operate, in which, because of the low residual news status of the social sciences, research or perspectives deemed to lack credibility or relevance are simply ignored. Quite simply, journalists believe they have bigger fish to fry. Of course, attacks do occur, but these are the exception rather than the rule, and generally represent a 'soft-news' option that may be useful on a quiet news day, but are seen generally to have only a limited media mileage.

However, once a piece of research or a potential pundit is deemed sufficiently relevant and credible to be reported, a second process begins.
Because social scientists are mainly used by journalists as ‘arbiters’ rather than ‘advocates’ in their reports (which is also the role to which social scientists aspire), the journalist has obvious reasons for wanting to emphasize the credibility of these contributors. Firstly because ‘arbiter’ selection is inextricably linked to a journalist’s sense of her own political and professional judgement. By trusting an arbiter, the journalist is also, by extension, trusting her own initial judgement’ (Deacon and Golding 1994: 16), and secondly, because news accounts are not only meant to be interesting and entertaining, but also authoritative and objective accounts about society (Ericson et al. 1987). Aside from the fact that news presentation conventions discourage reticence and equivocation, any challenge to the authority and status of selected arbiters within a piece both contravenes their reason for inclusion and potentially weakens the item’s narrative authority. For this reason, selling credibility in a pressurized textual format involves talking up expertise, rather than clouding it with caveats, and tends to foster an indulgent treatment of those social scientists who are deemed newsworthy.

Social scientists and journalists: reticence rather than conflict?

Although the idea of triangulation has been associated mainly with a quantitative research strategy of ‘multi-operationalism’ (Webb et al. 1966), it has been incorporated into discussions of the ways in which quantitative and qualitative research can be combined. However, the discussion of triangulation in this latter context has been rather undifferentiated. In this article it has been argued that it is important to distinguish between planned and unplanned triangulation in the integration of quantitative and qualitative research. Unplanned triangulation can occur whenever the two research strategies are employed, but not for the purposes of triangulation. Regardless of whether triangulation is planned or unplanned, the outcome can be one in which there is mutual corroboration or a clash between the two sets of findings, thus yielding the set of possibilities listed in table 2.

In this article, we have examined research which conforms best to cell 4 in table 2. Triangulation was unplanned and there was a clash between our quantitative and qualitative findings—a potentially unsettling experience. The steps taken to accommodate and understand the factors behind this clash of findings are the main focus of the article. As our discussion suggests, we do not believe that it is necessary to view either quantitative or qualitative research findings from this research as having greater validity than the

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other. Rather, they seem to highlight different aspects of the social scientist–
journalist relationship, and thereby usefully bring each into sharp relief. The key theoretical value of this for the research as a whole, is that it enabled
us to appreciate more clearly the areas of collision and collusion between these
professional cultures, the latter of which has been insufficiently appreciated
to date. Collectively, these findings point to a reticent relationship framed
by incipient anxieties, in which both parties constantly weigh the possible
benefits against the potential costs, rather than one of persistent and open
conflict. Indeed, in many respects journalists and social scientists live in
parallel professional cultures: although they often interact, neither see the
other as having a very central role to play in the conduct of their business.

On a wider level, this case study also demonstrates the theoretical
benefits that can be gained through multi-methods research, as well as the
challenges it often poses. In many cases such research doesn’t simply
involve grafting qualitative detail onto statistical rigour, but presents a
range of apparent contradictions that need to be recognized and grappled
with. In our opinion, provided each component has sufficient validity,
these differences should be dealt with, rather than diffused through the
selective privileging of one form of evidence over the other. However,
whatever short-term inconvenience this may cause, in many cases the
reappraisal and re-analysis required can reap long-term analytical rewards:
alerting the researcher to the possibility that issues are more multifaceted
than they may have initially supposed, and offering the opportunity to
develop more convincing and robust explanations of the social processes
being investigated. This is surely the ultimate objective of all genuinely
exploratory research, which has no explicit political or methodological
purism to peddle, and which has, as George Gerbner (1983: 362) once put
it, a willingness to let the chips fall where they may.

Notes

1. Science correspondents in the British news media are almost exclusively natural science
correspondents. In our content analysis of media coverage we found only one social science related
item that was authored by these specialist correspondents.

2. A recurring example of this can be found in media reporting of the ‘violence and the media’ issue,
where journalists’ common-sense judgement that there must be a causal link between the two has
led to some scathing attacks on researchers who have either failed to find evidence of a relationship,
or who reject the terms of reference of this populist debate. See, for example, one national
newspaper columnist’s intemperate criticisms of a researcher who rejects the ‘strong effects’

3. A social science related item was defined as a news item, editorial, feature article or letter that made
any explicit reference to a social scientist or piece of social science research. The sole exception to
these terms of inclusion was the reporting of opinion polls directly commissioned by the media.


5. Inter-coder reliability checks were conducted on all main variables and revealed high levels of inter-
coder reliability.
Very occasionally certain disciplines or institutions come under more sustained media attack. For example, since mid-1995 a succession of news items and programmes have appeared (and reappeared) in the national media attacking degree programmes in communication, cultural and media studies.

References


When asked to explain his party’s unforeseen defeat in the 1992 general election, the Labour MP Gerald Kaufman speculated that the British electorate had been caught ‘between fear and loathing’ and that, in the event, fear of the unknown had exceeded contempt borne of familiarity. In 1997 it would seem that Kaufman’s analysis no longer applies: Labour’s crushing victory clearly revealed an electorate no longer hamstrung by the prospect of change. However, in our view the phrase still retains some relevance, in this case as a way of characterizing the disposition of large sections of the national press throughout the 1997 campaign.

This may seem a strange claim to make, as an orthodoxy has quickly emerged – firmly subscribed to by the new government – which posits that one of the most notable features of the election was a major realignment in press opinion behind Labour, and that this probably played a significant part in the outcome. Certainly, an examination of the stated party affiliations of newspapers at the end of the campaign shows that 11 of the 19 national titles endorsed Tony Blair, delivering his party over 60 percent of press support in circulation terms. This contrasts dramatically with previous elections – in every post-war contest the Conservatives have commanded a clear majority of press support, and in 1992 70 percent of press opinion endorsed the Major government.

In this article, however, we argue that the ‘reversal model’ of press affiliation that this and other more anecdotal evidence implies at once oversimplifies and overestimates the changes that occurred. Furthermore, if unchallenged, it may create misconceptions about the likely nature of press influence in the election.

This perspective can only be gained by looking beyond the political machinations that led several papers to declare a shift in their allegiance – although the reasons for this change have an undeniable fascination (Deacon et al., 1997) – and focus instead upon the actual substance of press coverage. Towards this end, this article presents findings from a detailed content analysis of media reporting during the 1997 election, which was
commissioned by, and reported in, the *Guardian* newspaper throughout the campaign. The content sample covered the last five weeks of the formal campaign period (31 March – 30 April 1997), and involved the analysis of election coverage in the main national newspapers, terrestrial television and radio news programmes.

Our article examines the *interpretative* and *evaluative* features of press reporting in the 1997 campaign. This conceptual distinction was developed by the authors in previous research (see Golding, 1990; Deacon and Golding, 1994) and provides a convenient way of differentiating the contours of coverage. In conventional terms the adequacy of reporting is judged by its fairness, objectivity, and impartiality as an account of some event or person. Is the report pro or anti some party, policy or initiative? This is the *evaluative* dimension, but it is only one vector. We also need to consider what topics are rendered visible, named and promoted in coverage. This is the *interpretative* dimension and simply asks what is an issue – in this case, the election – seen to be about? We begin our analysis of national press coverage by addressing this important dimension of political coverage.

**Interpreting the Campaign**

Our discussion of the interpretative features of press coverage focuses on two related questions: how much newspaper attention in general was paid to the election during the campaign (i.e., how important was it seen to be as a composite 'issue'?); and, within these parameters, what were seen as the most important topics for consideration? For the latter question, we not only explore the extent of interpretative variation between different press sectors (broadsheets, middle-range tabloids and other tabloids), but also in comparison with broadcast coverage. This additional perspective is important because, although everybody recognizes the *evaluative* differences between press and broadcast coverage (in their mode of address, stylistic conventions, political motivation, etc.), far less attention has been paid to the extent of their *interpretative* distinctiveness. Is it meaningful to study the issue agendas of the press in isolation, or should we recognize that newspapers are simply part of a broad media consensus as to what the most important electoral issues are?

**How Much Coverage?**

The 1997 general election had one of the longest formal campaigns in recent times and one of the most drawn-out preludes. The pre-election phoney war started well back in 1996 and politicians and media alike had been on a war footing for many months. Whatever the political reasons for this tortuous shadow boxing, the sheer length of the hostilities presented a considerable challenge for journalists. How could they maintain a sense of interest and
drama in a campaign that had been so long anticipated, had dragged out for so long, and that had all the signs of being a one-horse race?

Figure 1 compares the average proportion of available news space allocated to the 1997 election by different press sectors in the last five weeks of the campaign. Two main points stand out. Firstly, as the campaign hotted up, press interest cooled down. By the second week, tabloid attention started to decline, and only increased significantly as the contest reached its conclusion. The broadsheets and the middle-range tabloids maintained a broadly consistent level of interest for slightly longer, but by the penultimate campaign week their attention too flagged appreciably. Secondly, the proportion of attention given to the election varied according to the amount of editorial space available. Broadsheets dedicated by far the greatest percentage of their (greater) news space to the election, while the popular tabloids dedicated the least of the little they have. The middle-range tabloids fell between the two.

These findings suggest that there were differing perceptions about the newsworthiness of the election across the national press. But beyond these fundamental interpretative judgements, what specific issues excited greatest press attention, and did this agenda vary in comparison with other media sectors?

**Issue Prominence**

A simple comparison of the most prominent overall topics in press and broadcast coverage suggests that there was a close congruity between them. Following previous campaigns, attention to the form, conduct and outcome of
the electoral process itself (e.g. opinion polls, party events, spin doctors, general 'horse race' issues) dominated both forums, being the main topic in 31 per cent of press items and 33 per cent of broadcast items. This was followed by 'Europe' (press: 15 per cent, broadcast: 16 per cent), 'sleaze' (10 per cent: 7 per cent), 'education' (7 per cent: 6 per cent), 'taxation' (6 per cent: 6 per cent) and 'constitutional issues' (4 per cent: 8 per cent).

Furthermore, there was a consistency between media sectors in deciding what the election was not about. In 1997, 'social security', 'health', 'Northern Ireland', 'employment', 'crime', 'local government', 'housing', 'race', 'privatization', 'business', 'arts/media', and 'defence' all but fell off the media map, as did 'the economy', which is particularly remarkable when one considers that this was the most prominent issue in broadcast and tabloid coverage of the 1992 election (see Billig et al., 1993: 113). Evidently there is far greater media mileage in a full blown recession than a steady economic recovery.

TABLE 1
COMPARISON OF THE MOST PROMINENT ISSUES (BY WEEK) IN PRESS AND BROADCAST ELECTION COVERAGE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Week</th>
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<th>'Europe'</th>
<th>'Sleaze'</th>
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<th>Week</th>
<th>'Education'</th>
<th>'Taxation'</th>
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Notes: One main issue was coded per news item. Twinned cells printed in bold indicate a statistically significant variation (p<0.05) using the chi-squared test. Percentages are separate and do not add up to 100. *wk 1* = 31/3/97 to 4/4/97; *wk 2* = 7/4/97 to 11/4/97; *wk 3* = 14/4/97 to 18/4/97; *wk 4* = 21/4/97 to 25/4/97; *wk 5* = 28/4/97. Base numbers of items for percentages are: Press (weeks 1 to 5) 448, 390, 420, 364, 241; Broadcast (weeks 1 to 5) 110, 141, 121, 134, 102.
However, despite this consensus as to the main parameters of electoral debate, there were also areas of significant variation between press and broadcast reporting. This becomes clear when one looks beyond an aggregated perspective of issue-prominence, and explores the rise and fall of individual issues as the campaign unfolded. Table 1 presents in rank order the changing degrees of press and broadcast media attention given to the six most prominent issues during the last five weeks of the campaign.

The prominence of 'election process' and 'Europe' issues in press and broadcast coverage show a pattern of initial convergence and eventual divergence. In week 3, the proportion of 'election'-focused coverage temporarily reduced in broadcast media, and increased in the press. But in the final days of the campaign, this coverage increased exponentially in broadcast media, and far exceeded the proportion of attention in the press. In terms of coverage of 'Europe', attention peaked and declined in a similar way, but the issue received significantly greater prominence in broadcast media in week 3 and significantly less in week 5.

In contrast, attention given to 'sleaze' and 'education' showed only momentary divergences across media sectors. The only statistically significant variation occurred in week 2, where the proportion of press coverage of 'sleaze' increased as broadcast interest started a terminal decline. With 'taxation' and 'constitutional issues' there were initial, significant divergences that quickly disappeared. In the first week of the sampling, both issues received considerably more attention in broadcast coverage, but this soon reduced into line with the lower levels of press interest.

Apart from highlighting moments of independence in press and broadcast electoral agendas, these data demonstrate how issues moved in and out of focus as the election progressed. For example, the dominance of 'sleaze' in weeks 1 and 2 was usurped by 'Europe' in week 3. Furthermore, they reveal how all but one of the issue categories became comparatively marginalized by the latter stages of the campaign. As decision time arrived, coverage of the election process itself started to clog available news space like pond weed.

Of course, these distinctions between press and broadcast agendas are very general, and raise the further question as to whether there were any interpretative variations within each grouping. Interestingly, there were no significant fluctuations between broadcast programmes in their interpretations of the key electoral issues, even when separated on a week-by-week and issue-by-issue basis. However, within press coverage there were occasionally wild discrepancies (see Table 2). The most noticeable example of this came in the changing amount of coverage given to 'election process' issues. In the popular tabloid and middle-range tabloid press, this coverage fluctuated greatly in prominence, collapsing in the second week, recovering in the third and fourth, and then tailing off in week 5. In contrast, the broadsheets retained
### Table 2: Comparison of the Most Prominent Issues (by Week) Across Press Sectors

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<td>7</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: One main issue was coded per item. Percentages are separate and do not add up to 100. Twinned cells printed in bold indicate a statistically significant variation (p<0.05) using the chi-squared test. 'Wk 1' = 31/3/97 to 4/4/97; 'Wk 2' = 7/4/97 to 11/4/97; 'Wk 3' = 14/4/97 to 18/4/97; 'Wk 4' = 21/4/97 to 25/4/97; 'Wk 5' = 28/4/97 to 30/4/97. Base numbers of items for percentages are: Broadsheets (weeks 1 to 5) 296, 258, 281, 241, 152; Tabloids (weeks 1 to 5) 81, 71, 69, 67, 48; Middle-market tabloids (weeks 1 to 5) 71, 61, 70, 56, 41.

a more consistent level of attention to this topic between weeks 1 and 4, and increased this coverage greatly in the last week.

With coverage of ‘Europe’ and ‘sleaze’ the distributions are more consistent, but there were significant differences in the amount of attention given to these issues at particular moments. The peak of interest in ‘Europe’ in the third week of the sample was most evident in the middle-range tabloids, revealing their entrenched eurosceptic concerns, whereas the aggregate increase in press attention to ‘sleaze’ in week 2 previously noted in table 1 was driven by the growing fixation of the tabloids and, to a less extent, the middle-range tabloids. In contrast, the broadsheets, like the broadcasters, by that time had decided it was time to move on.

With ‘education’ and ‘taxation’ coverage there were momentary periods of variation: ‘Education’ flared up as a popular tabloid issue in week 3, and
‘taxation’ drew significantly greater coverage in the middle range and popular tabloids during week 2. ‘Constitutional issues’, meanwhile, were almost the sole preserve of the broadsheets, only scraping into the popular press frame in the very last stages of the campaign.

So what are the broader implications of these areas of interpretative variance between press and broadcast media, and between press sectors? The first point is that much of the media’s election reporting covered difficult political terrain for the Conservative Party, particularly during the earlier stages of the campaign. In the first two weeks, political sleaze – an issue which almost solely implicated the Tories – was to the fore, only to be followed in the third week by ‘Europe’, the issue that had divided the party from top to bottom over previous years. A closer analysis of the sub-themes of Europe coverage during the election show that the dominant European press topic was ‘Tory divisions over Europe’, being a prominent theme in 9 percent of all press items. In comparison, ‘Labour divisions over Europe’ were the focus of only 0.8 percent of items. At the same time, more expedient topics for Conservative spin-doctoring, such as the economy and employment, were completely marginalized, as were areas of potential difficulty for Labour (e.g. ‘constitutional reform’). Of course, in making this point we are aware that these basic measures tell us nothing about how particular issues were dealt with by the media. Nevertheless, defining the terms of an argument is a crucial stage in any electoral battle, and on this score the Conservatives were conspicuous losers.

Secondly, there is no evidence that interpretative agendas of the press varied according to their stated party preferences. For example, despite the fact that both mid-market papers included in the analysis backed the Conservatives, they showed no inclination towards playing down difficult issues for the Major government. Indeed, they increased their attention to the sleaze issue in week 2, in contrast to declining levels of broadcast and broadsheet interest, and played a key role in forcing ‘Europe’ into the forefront of the media agenda in week 3.

We now turn our attention to the second vector of coverage mentioned in the introduction: the evaluative dimensions of press reporting of the 1997 campaign.

Evaluating the Parties

The obvious starting point for considering press evaluations is to examine the direct editorial statements made by the papers about their political preferences. In doing so there is a need to look beyond simple declarations of party preference and consider in a more detailed way the nature of support being given. Certainly, the press take these position statements very seriously
themselves, and are very concerned about the nuances of their endorsement.

Tabloid Press Editorials

In the 1997 election all of the popular tabloids declared for Labour. However, on closer examination this apparent consensus begins to fragment. Predictably, the Mirror group titles (the Daily Mirror, Sunday Mirror and People) offered strident and unconditional support for New Labour and launched vitriolic attacks on the Conservatives. By comparison, the editorial endorsements offered by 'the converts' (the Sun, the News of the World and the Daily Star) were far more guarded. For example, a close analysis of the two-page editorial that accompanied the self-styled 'historic announcement' that 'The Sun Backs Blair' (18 March 1997) was permeated by reservations. According to this statement, the paper's shift had been mainly motivated by personality rather than policy considerations:

The Tories have all the right policies but all the wrong faces. In Tony Blair, Labour has the face that fits – and many of the Tory policies. If it works, Clony Blair has hijacked it (18 March 97: 6).

The editorial ended by attacking the social chapter as 'the biggest Trojan horse imaginable', and warning that 'when we think [Labour] are wrong, we will shout so loud we will deafen them' (ibid.).

To a large extent, the sour and reluctant tone of this initial editorial can be explained by internal politics at News International, where Rupert Murdoch had imposed the political shift in spite of the views of senior editorial staff (Guardian, 23 March 1997: 23). As the campaign progressed, there was a noticeable thawing in the paper's editorial stance, and on the day of the election it ran a front page editorial that repeated on six occasions 'Britain deserves better. And Blair WILL make it better' ('It Must Be You', 1 May 97: 1). But, here again, it is not difficult to discern clear tensions in the paper's position. For example, early on in the editorial it is stated:

Like us, [Blair] has grave fears for the fabric of the country and the quality of life of millions of people – families, children, the sick, old people, the poor. Fairness, social justice, equality and opportunity are not just politicians' buzzwords. They are REAL issues that affect REAL people (ibid.).

just as one begins to think that one is half way through a Fabian society leaflet, the argument suddenly shifts:

Blair has some fierce battles ahead. He must take on Europe. He must face down the unions who wrongly reckon they are owed a pay-off, he must stamp on anyone in his Cabinet whose natural instinct might be to
solve a problem by throwing taxpayers' money at it. The party that founded the welfare state must be the one that tames a beast that is galloping out of control (ibid.).

These sorts of themes were echoed in the editorial proclamations of other tabloid converts. All agreed on the importance of maintaining a strong market-based, anti-union, eurosceptic, anti-welfarist, low-taxation approach to government, and all specifically identified a debt of gratitude to Thatcherism:

[The Conservatives] created an affluent, strike free society able to compete in the modern world. Margaret Thatcher gave us back our pride, a belief in the enterprise culture (THERE'S TONY ONE WAY TO GO, *Daily Star*, 30 April 1997: 8).

**Mid-Market Tabloid Editorials**

In direct contrast to the popular tabloids, all of the mid-market papers endorsed the Conservative party in their final editorials (*Daily Mail, Mail on Sunday, Daily Express, Sunday Express*). Yet, here again, there were signs of bets being hedged.

At the start of the campaign there was some speculation that the *Daily Mail* would follow the *Sun* at least halfway across the Rubicon and abstain from endorsing any political party in the election (*Guardian*, 24 March 1997: 2). In the event, it continued to support the Conservatives, citing Europe as its principal reason. On the penultimate day of the campaign the paper plastered a Union Jack over its entire front page alongside the stark comment:

There is a terrible danger that the British people, drugged by the seductive mantra 'It's time for change', are stumbling, eyes glazed, into an election that could undo 1,000 years of our nation's history (*Daily Mail*, 30 April 1997: 1).

In the detailed editorial inside, the paper claimed a Labour landslide could 'sign Britain's death warrant as a free and sovereign nation state' (THE BATTLE FOR BRITAIN, 30 April 1997: 8). Blair was also criticized for supporting the social chapter and other employment directives and for not fully purging his party of its high-taxation, anti-entrepreneurial tendencies. But if New Labour bore the brunt of the thrashing, the Conservatives were also dealt some hefty blows:

Let us say here that the *Daily Mail* holds no torch for this Conservative administration. It is ... John Major's incompetence as the nation's Chief Executive that has really marred his administration. To be blunt, he has been an ineffectual leader.
The Mail on Sunday's editorial judgement (A QUESTION OF TRUST, Mail on Sunday, 27 April 1997: 32) was less scathing about John Major (acknowledging his ‘remarkable’ tenacity), was more convinced about the extent of Labour's reconstruction, and was far less fixated with the issue of Europe (although a strong eurosceptic stance was evident). Ultimately the paper claimed its decision to stay with the Conservatives was prompted by a series of unanswered questions about New Labour and an instinctive feeling that ‘there is a better case – on balance – for trusting John Major’ (ibid.). This issue of trust was also a prominent theme in the Sunday Express's pre-election declaration, which asserted that 'If it is a choice between John Major and Tony Blair's well-drilled army, then we believe that John Major's rabble has its heart nearer to the right place' (IF YOU WANT A STEADY HAND GUIDING BRITAIN, VOTE FOR MAJOR, Sunday Express, 27 April 97: 24).

Of all the mid-market tabloids, only the Daily Express presented an unconditional and constructive case for voting Tory in its final editorial, citing OECD figures to demonstrate the strength of the economic recovery under the Conservatives and concluding that 'If the Labour party is prepared to give the Tories credit for transforming the British economy, it would be churlish for the rest of us to do any less' (Daily Express, 30 April 1997: 10).

Broadsheet Editorials

Of all press sectors, the broadsheet 'quality' papers revealed the greatest diversity in political affiliation. The Conservatives commanded support from three titles (the Daily Telegraph, Sunday Telegraph and Sunday Times), Labour were endorsed by five (the Guardian, Observer, Independent, Independent on Sunday and Financial Times), and one paper abstained from declaring a preference for a specific political party (The Times).

As with the Mirror group's support for Labour, the Daily Telegraph and Sunday Telegraph's endorsement of the Conservatives was entirely predictable. Certainly, both papers remained conspicuously unmoved by the siren songs of New Labour. As the Telegraph put it, in Kipling-esque tones:

It is true that Labour show some signs of understanding that Tory economic policies work, but they do so only in the way in which a savage, finding a watch in the desert, recognizes that it is a sophisticated object. They do not know how to operate it... Voting is a serious matter. If you vote Labour, you can't be serious. Vote Conservative (Daily Telegraph, 30 April 1997: 20).

By comparison, the final Sunday Times editorial was more equivocal in its support for the Major government. Full tribute was paid to Blair's leadership qualities and the internal reforms he had instituted, and the Conservatives' divisions and improprieties were trenchantly criticized, but in the end it
adjudged that the stronger eurosceptic tendencies of the Tories (Europe being, in its view, the only issue that really distinguished the two parties), made them the least risky option.

Of the broadsheets that backed Labour, all but the Financial Times were certain about the need to depose the Tories and that the Liberal Democrats had a crucial future role to play alongside a new Labour government. On the latter point, there were subtle but clear differences between these four papers. The Independent and the Independent on Sunday intimated that while New Labour were their practical choice, the Liberal Democrats were their ‘ideal world’ preference. In contrast, neither the Guardian nor the Observer gave any sense of preferring Liberal Democratic radicalism over New Labour pragmatism. Although they commended the Liberal Democrats on many of their policies, and advised readers to vote for them where it made tactical sense, they were more fulsome in their praise for New Labour and more excited at the transformations in prospect. As the penultimate Guardian editorial put it:

Tomorrow gives the progressive movement in the country its biggest and most exciting opportunity in a generation (30 April 1997: 20).

One uniting theme shared by all four papers was their strong pro-European sympathies. The Financial Times also took this stance, and backed Labour solely on the basis of it. Of all the Labour-supporting broadsheets, the FT was most unsure about Labour’s broader credentials, and only endorsed the party, as it put it, ‘by default’:

This does not amount to anything like an enthusiastic endorsement. The closer Mr Blair has come to power, the less impressive he has appeared (EUROPE IS THE ISSUE, Financial Times, 29 April 1997: 28).

Europe was also the defining consideration for The Times, albeit from a diametrically opposed perspective. Rather than declaring for any party, the paper urged voters to support local politicians with the most impeccable eurosceptic credentials. Consequently, the paper endorsed a plethora of political candidates, from Conservative, Labour, Liberal Democrat and Referendum parties, which it listed on the day of the vote on a constituency-by-constituency basis (PRINCIPLE NOT PARTY: A VOTE FOR MEMBERS WHO WILL DEFEND PARLIAMENT, The Times, 30 April 1997: 22).

The ‘Opinion Continuum’

This review of national press opinion shows that categorizing the political preferences of newspapers simply on a party-by-party basis masks a diverse range of distinctive political positions. Whereas some papers endorsed their choice categorically, others adopted a more equivocal stance. Furthermore,
papers gave very different reasons for their support. For example, the *Observer* backed Labour out of excitement at what it perceived to be a progressive, pro-European, social democratic agenda, whereas the *Sun* backed Blair on the basis of his strong leadership, public appeal, eurosceptic potential and apparent acceptance of Thatcherite orthodoxies.

For these reasons, we believe it is better to conceive of national press editorial opinion as falling at different points on a continuum between the two main parties, rather than categorizing support on an 'either/or' basis (see Figure 2). This allows us to appreciate how much press opinion in the 1997 campaign tended towards the centre, falling into an area we label here 'the corridor of uncertainty'. Papers categorized in this section may have displayed differing levels of commitment and agnosticism about their chosen party, but all ultimately rationalized their choice through 'on balance' judgements rather than firm conviction. By recognizing the common ground shared by the flakier ends of Labour and Conservative press support, we can begin to appreciate the limits to the political conversions that occurred during the 1997 campaign. Although there was a clear swing towards Labour compared with 1992 (only the *FT* bucked the trend and moved back towards the Tories), these transitions all constituted movements either into the
'corridor of uncertainty' (the Sun, Sunday Times, Mail on Sunday, News of the World), or out of it (the Independent, Independent on Sunday). No title made the complete journey from one end to the other. In editorial terms, press opinion shifted rather than completely reversed.

There are dangers, of course, in relying solely on editorials to chart press partisanship, as we cannot be sure that what was said in leader articles is a reliable indicator of what was done in terms of routine news presentation. We also need to take a wider perspective on press evaluations throughout the campaign.

Bias in the news is notoriously difficult to define and, for this reason, analysts avoid using the term. However, we coded stories which were unambiguously favourable in tone or content to one of the main parties. These stories were judged to reflect, mainly or solely, the preferred 'frame' of one or other party simply because of the event they reported. Excluded from this count were stories that were roughly balanced, and also those which, despite containing a negative take on one party's position, were not positively presenting any other party position. This gave us a clear and tight assessment of evaluative trends in media coverage (see Table 3)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Conservative frame %</th>
<th>Labour frame %</th>
<th>Liberal Democrat frame %</th>
<th>Other frame %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Financial Times</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Telegraph</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Guardian</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
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<tr>
<td>Times</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>21</td>
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<td>9</td>
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<tr>
<td>Express</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mail</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mirror</td>
<td>14</td>
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<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sun</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>0</td>
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As a general rule, one would expect to find greatest balance in 'framing' in the broadsheet press, because of the clearer distinction made in these papers between editorializing and news reporting, and least balance in tabloids, where reporting is often more nakedly driven by partisan motives. The findings in Table 3 confirm the former assumption, as all broadsheets maintained a rough balance of positive stories across the major parties, regardless of their particular position on the 'opinion-continuum'. However,
there were noticeable differences in the framing of different mid-market and popular tabloids, depending on their stated political affiliation. Among those tabloids that expressed a definite party preference in their editorials (the Mail, Express and Mirror) there was a clear privileging of their chosen parties' frame. But with those tabloids wandering 'the corridor of uncertainty' (the Sun, the Daily Star) there was a broad balance in their framing, with neither party gaining any clear evaluative advantage. Could it be that the political repositioning of these papers had also led to a road-to-Damascus-like conversion to the virtues of editorial balance, or is the evidence symptomatic of a different process? As we discuss in our concluding remarks, we are convinced the latter is the case.

Conclusions: Hollow-Centred Partisanship

Our discussion of national press coverage of the 1997 general election suggests several main points about press behaviour during this period. In general news terms, there is no doubt that the Conservative party had a difficult campaign, and the press played a major part in increasing their discomfort, particularly over sleaze and Europe. But these difficulties were mainly at the interpretative rather than evaluative level, for although the Tories signal failed to control the terms of press debate, they broadly achieved parity with Labour in presenting their views on the issues under discussion. In terms of editorial opinion, the Conservatives also suffered, but again perhaps not as greatly as some have assumed. Although the majority of editorial opinion, whether measured in terms of titles or readership, backed the Labour party, a large portion of this support was conditional and cautionary in nature. Certainly, while the Tories may have received a bad press from many of their previous cheerleaders in 1997, in no way can it be said to have approached the level of vitriol heaped on Labour in 1992. Labour's achievement in this election was in decommissioning the big guns of the Tory press rather than in turning their fire on their previous masters. Most tabloid partisanship in this election had a hollow ring.

Overall, for many newspapers, particularly those at the centre of the 'opinion continuum', the 1997 campaign was as much about disorientation as it was about reorientation: their fears about New Labour being counterbalanced by their loathing for an increasingly divided and directionless Tory party. This in turn seems to have generated a sense of ennui as the campaign progressed, as press attention fell in all sectors as the day of reckoning approached. For some, the 1997 election demonstrated the evil of two lessers.

Finally, although Conservative party affiliations may have wavered, conservative values – individualism, euroscepticism, anti-
welfarism, etc. — remain engraved on the hearts of many papers. The fact that these can sit alongside an endorsement of Labour reveals more about the shift in the party-political landscape than it does about any transition in the core values of these influential opinion leaders. In 1997, the press may no longer be Conservative (with a capital C), but they remain highly conservative. We have witnessed a ‘C’ change, not a sea-change.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Our thanks to our coding team: Jackie Abel, Mark Harrison and Simon Cross.

NOTES

1. The newspaper sample comprised: the Sun, Daily Mirror, Daily Mail, Daily Express, Financial Times, The Times, Guardian, Daily Telegraph and Independent. The broadcast sample comprised: the BBC1 9pm news, ITN News at Ten, BBC2 Newsnight, Channel 4’s 7pm news and BBC Radio 4’s Today programme (7.30am – 8.30am). For logistical reasons (i.e. the Guardian’s copy deadlines), the sampling was circumscribed in the four respects,

1. Only weekday election coverage was sampled.
2. Not all editorial content in newspaper content was analysed. The study focused on front pages, all designated domestic news pages inside each paper, designated election segments and pages carrying leader editorials.
3. The analysis focused on ‘news’ rather than ‘feature’ coverage.
4. Each election item was measured in cm². The coders then calculated what proportion of available coded editorial space in the newspaper the item covered (i.e., the base N was the total number of cm² on the number of pages sampled.
5. None of these topics individually received more than 4 per cent of either press or broadcast attention over the campaign period, and most attracted 1 per cent or less. The top six issues were the main topics in three quarters of the coverage in both media sectors.
6. During this week the Daily Mail took it upon itself to raise the issue of Europe in the campaign. At the start of the week it carried an approving story about 200 Tory MPs lining up against monetary union, and later in the week carried a front page editorial titled ‘The Battle for Britain’ in which it asserted there was ‘a deafening silence at the heart of this election and its name is Europe’ (Daily Mail, 16 April 1997:1)

5. Our thanks and apologies to Geoffrey Boycott, who first coined the term in an entirely different context.

REFERENCES


THE 2001 election campaign really began, not when Mr Blair went to the Palace, but the previous week when a stream of national press editors and managers was to be seen flowing up and down Downing Street, culminating in Rupert Murdoch's emergence from No. 11. Business was back to normal when, the week after the election, Chancellor Gordon Brown welcomed one of Downing Street's first corporate visitors, the same Mr Murdoch, whose four national newspapers had all endorsed New Labour. The sacked Minister for Culture, Chris Smith, warned swiftly and sharply of the dangers of 'falling in hock' to Mr Murdoch, as the returned government deferred the development of new cross-media ownership rules and an inquiry into BskyB.

The interest shown in the media election, if not intense among voters, was fierce enough among politicians to have Mr Blair declaring in anguish by the third week that the media were 'ignoring the real issues', i.e. those that he wished to campaign on. At the same time Labour Party General Secretary, Margaret McDonagh, accused the broadcasters of contriving camera friendly bust-ups between politicians and protesters. In an exchange with the Prime Minister at the climax of the TV campaign, BBC interviewer Jeremy Paxman, irritated by Blair's insistence that they move onto another topic, interjected 'I assume you want to be Prime Minister, I just want to be an interviewer, so can we stick to that arrangement?'

Predictions of a low turnout also anticipated voter antipathy to the campaign. Newspaper sales and viewing figures were indeed down, though nothing like as dramatically as in 1997, remembered as an eventful campaign, but in reality only becoming so in its last few days. In 2001 many newspaper sales dipped through the campaign, the Express group dropped by 2.8% in the month, the Sun by 1.3%, the Mirror by 1.1% and The Times by 0.7%. A few dailies even reported slight increases in sales (e.g. the Guardian by 0.4% and Financial Times by 1%). Whether these increases were despite the election only further analysis could tell. While the weekly soap operas continued to attract
viewing figures of about 13 million, the BBC’s 6.00pm news dropped from a peak of 5.4 million in the first week of the campaign to 4.8 million in the fourth week, while the ITN News at Ten moved from a peak of 5.9 million to 5.4 million in the same period.

The most dramatic media aspect of the 2001 campaign was the increased level of Labour support in the press, consolidating the switch in newspaper partisanship in the 1997 general election. The last Royal Commission on the Press, in 1977, suggested ‘There is no doubt that over most of this century the labour movement has had less newspaper support than its right-wing opponents and that its beliefs and activities have been unfavourably reported by the majority of the press’. In 1997 the Murdoch Sun’s switch to support Labour was a watershed. In 2001 the support for New Labour by almost all the national press was stunning, not just for its volume but also for the limited comment it evoked. As we discuss below, this may be because old-style partisanship has gone, to be replaced by a qualified and contingent support, in which a sceptical distance from all parties is the common tone rather than ecstatic endorsement of any. The media have become not just reporters but quizzical commentators, more moderators than mediators in the modern campaign.

To assess the role played by the media, the Communications Research Centre at Loughborough University, conducted a weekly analysis of reporting of the campaign in the national press and broadcasting, as it did in 1992 and 1997. In this article we present several measures of media participation in the campaign. These include: the extent of media attention to the campaign, the distribution of party coverage, the range of issues coverage and the evaluative dimensions of media commentary.

The intensity of campaign coverage

We promise not to bore you, so here’s how we’ll be different. We’ll be dispatching our special correspondent—the man in the white suit—also known as the biggest pain in politics. On behalf of 5 News viewers he’ll expose what’s really going on (Channel 5 News, 9.5.01).

This was to be the ‘post-spin’ election, in which voters and commentators alike were so battle-hardened and wised-up, that the worst efforts of what we had all learned to call ‘spin’ in the previous two elections, would fail in the face of stolid and knowing scepticism. But in the end the biggest concern of journalists and politicians was the loss of audiences. As the media were wary of turning us off, how sustained was news attention to a campaign that had long been anticipated and was widely seen as a one-horse race?

The amount of election related news coverage assessed on a calendar week basis varied across media sectors (see Table 1). Broadcast news and current affairs coverage remained fairly constant throughout the
1. Amount of Election News

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dates</th>
<th>Broadcast news (seconds)</th>
<th>Broadcast press (cm²)</th>
<th>Mid-market tabloids (cm²)</th>
<th>Other tabloids (cm²)</th>
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<td>1207</td>
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<td>28 May–1 June 2001</td>
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<td>3669</td>
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campaign, aside from a peak in week 2, and overall the total amount was only marginally down on 1997. The distribution in the broadsheet press also followed a similar pattern, rising slightly in week 2, falling slightly through weeks 3 and 4, and then rising again in the last few days of the campaign. In contrast, in the mid-market tabloids (Express and Mail) cumulative coverage fell more significantly after week 2, but mustered in the last week. But even this reduction pales by comparison with the collapse of attention in the other tabloid newspapers between weeks 1 and 4 (Mirror, Sun, Daily Record and Star). In the first three days of the formal campaign, average levels of election-related coverage in these papers nearly matched those in the mid-market tabloids, but by the fourth calendar week, levels of coverage were down by half. In the last few days the average figure increased, as some of the ‘red tops’ engineered their own gimmicks to liven things up. The Sun resorted to gratuitous sexism, running a ‘get em out ... to vote’ campaign, which involved driving three finalists from the Sun’s National Cleavage Week around the country encouraging people to vote on 7 June. Following revelations of the Prime Minister’s predilection for expensive designer underwear, the Mirror ran a series of simulated photo images speculating on the underpant preferences of other leading politicians. On election day, the Daily Star was leading with topless telephoto shots of actress Amanda Holden, and this typified a general trend in this sector.

In the Sun, Mirror and Star, only one-third (32%) of available frontpage leads during the campaign related to the election, compared with 78% of frontpage leads in the broadsheet press, and 87% of available lead items in TV news programmes. Yet it would be wrong to see these patterns as a unique product of the predictability of this contest. Coverage of the 1997 campaign traced a similar path, with broadcast and broadsheet media stoically sticking to the task while the tabloids looked elsewhere for diversion.5

The consistency of the amount of coverage in broadcast and broadsheet coverage was largely due to an ‘inertia effect’. Plans for covering the election in these sectors were laid well in advance, and levels of
Press and Broadcasting

coverage were in many respects independent of events. (Although not completely: as we see later, the slight bulge in coverage in week 2 can be explained by general media fascination with the fallout of the Deputy Prime Minister’s fight with a protestors on 16 May.) Evidently, strong vestiges remain in these sectors of what Blumler and Gurevitch have labelled a ‘sacerdotal orientation’ to the electoral process, i.e. a tendency to see it as ‘deserving consideration beyond that prescribed by the application of news values alone’. In contrast, the popular press once again inclined to a more ‘pragmatic’ approach, in which the treatment of politicians’ activities were ‘based on journalists’ assessments of their intrinsic newsworthiness’.

Who featured in the campaign?

During any election there are predictable concerns about the parity of media exposure between the parties. Indeed, the need for balance has long been inscribed in electoral law in Britain. In 2001, these perennial concerns assumed additional significance. Firstly, recent changes in the Representation of the People Act shifted the emphasis towards self-regulation in the way that broadcasters ensured that ‘over a reasonable period of time, a proper balance of different points of view is achieved’. Secondly, given the apparently dramatic volte-face in the party affiliations of many newspapers over the recent period, and the fact that newspapers are not bound by the legislation, it is interesting to assess what impact this political realignment has had on the distribution of the amount of party coverage.

Table 2 shows that Labour achieved a marginal cumulative advantage in the amount of broadcast coverage received, whether measured by the number of appearances or direct quotation. This differential is mainly due to the intense interest in the implications of the John Prescott punch-up. In newspapers, however, a substantial difference remains in the amount of space given to the two main parties, even controlling for

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Press</th>
<th>Broadcast</th>
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<tr>
<td>Tony Blair</td>
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<td>William Hague</td>
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<td>Charles Kennedy</td>
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<td>All other Labour sources</td>
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<td>All other Liberal Democrat</td>
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<td>All other parties</td>
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100% 100% 100% 100%

Notes: Up to five actors could be coded per news item. The total amount of direct quotation in an item was measured for each actor’s appearance (measured in seconds of direct speaking time for broadcast and number of directly quoted words for press). Source: Loughborough University Content Analysis Study, 7 May-6 June 2001.
the Prescott factor. Press realignment may not have delivered plaudits to Labour, but it delivered prominence.

The Liberal Democrats were conspicuously disadvantaged, accounting for less than 7% of all politicians' appearances and quotation space in newspapers, although in broadcasting, the two-party squeeze was far less evident. Overall, the distribution of party coverage in broadcast media suggests that old habits die hard, and that the traditional 'stop watch culture' in British electoral reporting, although no longer a legal obligation, remains tacitly observed.

More generally, these results confirm that British election reporting was highly 'presidentialised'. In the 2001 campaign, the three main party leaders accounted for 41% and 34% of all political sources reported in broadcast and newspaper coverage, respectively.

'Real issues' and real coverage

Tony Blair's complaint about the media's failure to cover the 'real issues' in the campaign, developed an earlier objection raised by his press secretary, Alistair Campbell. Responding to widespread media derision for the 'Blair at Prayer' election launch, Campbell argued that the problem lay not with the tastefulness of the photo opportunity, but rather the media's obsession with 'process rather than policy'.

Of course, journalists were quick to highlight the hypocrisy of Labour's position, immediately invoking the party's personalised attacks on Hague in one of their poster campaigns as a case in point. Nevertheless, our research confirms that the media campaign dealt with a narrow range of issues (see Table 3). Certainly, the broadsheets and broadcasting duly acted out their civic duties as media of record, delivering extensive analysis, data, and policy dissections. But at centre stage, on the main frontpages and in bulletin leads, it was hard to detect the country which had recently emerged from or was still suffering rail chaos, devastating floods, the foot and mouth epidemic, or major controversies over welfare benefit cuts and the effectiveness of anti-poverty policies. For all the dramatic coverage these matters may have attracted in the pre-election period, the issues underlying them (transport policy, climate change, the conduct and viability of the agrifood sector, social and economic exclusion, etc) were swept to the margins of media attention in the campaign itself.

The dominant news theme in all media sectors was the process and conduct of the campaign, followed far behind by 'Europe', 'Health service', and 'Taxation'. As with 'presidentialisation', this emphasis on process rather than policy represents an established rather than emerging trend, being a dominant feature of at least the last two general elections. In contrast, issues such as 'Transport', 'the Environment', 'Food Safety', 'Northern Ireland' and 'Defence' were all marginalised in the news agenda. Even 'Agriculture' failed to play to any significant
extensive (representing 2% of themes covered), despite confident predictions that 2001 would long be remembered as 'the foot and mouth election'.

If anything, it is more likely to go down in the annals as the 'fist in mouth' election, following the vast coverage sparked by John Prescott's fight with an egg-throwing protestor on 16 May. The footage of the Deputy Prime Minister rolling around a flowerbed with a man half his age was lovingly replayed in slow motion on all major news bulletins over the following days, and the tabloid headline writers had a fieldday. Alluding to Prescott's earlier nickname of 'two jags' (earned by his penchant for expensive limousines), the Sun immediately rechristened him 'Two Jabs'. The Mirror headline simply used one word: 'ManiFISTo'

With hindsight the event was a storm in a teacup. For all the media's interest in the wider political consequences of Prescott's recklessness, Labour's support was not affected and, if anything, the Deputy Prime Minister's stock rose with the public. The fracas also conveniently distracted attention from two other unscripted events that had ruffled Labour's feathers on the same day, the booing of the Home Secretary's speech at the Police Federation, and the collaring of the Prime Minister on a hospital walkabout by an irate woman, Sharon Storrer, incensed by the general squalor and shortage of beds at the hospital. But 16 May 2001 also marked the launch of Labour's manifesto—the mission statement of the party that by common consent was virtually certain to govern Britain over the next five years. Even this highly significant event was sidetracked by Prescott's fist. The following day, coverage of the
'Manifisto' in the mid-market tabloids exceeded 'Manifesto' coverage by a ratio of 4.6 to 1. Predictably, this imbalance was even more evident in the red top tabloids (5.5 to 1). In the broadsheets, the ratio was 2.2 to 1 and in TV news 2.6 to 1.

The rise of the mediators

Our research also demonstrates that sound-bite politics is growing. Comparing recent elections shows a consistent decline since the 1992 general election in the average time a politician is seen speaking in television news items. In 1992 the average time on ITV was 22.3 seconds, whereas in 2001 this had shortened to 17.6 seconds. The same trend could be found on BBC1. Here the figures were 26.5 in 1992 and 20.3 in 2001. The same story is to be found if we merely take the political leaders. In 1992 the figures on BBC1 and ITV were 37.3 and 32.0 seconds respectively. In 2001 the time was down to 24.8 seconds on BBC1 and 21.2 on ITV. In all these comparisons, the figures for 1997 fell between those of 1992 and 2001. So, a clear trend emerges. The televised quotes from the politicians are getting shorter by the election.

The causes of the shrinking sound bite are not immediately obvious. Certainly, the shrinkage is not due to the actions of the politicians themselves, who continue to speak at length and strive to have their speeches reproduced on the news. Nor, as we have seen, can this be due to any dramatic decline in the attention given to general elections on television. Consequently, the suspicion must be that the producers of news programmes have been cutting down on the words of politicians and filling the space with something else.

The data suggest that the news and current affairs programmes have been giving more airtime to their own correspondents and experts. If we take all the broadcast coverage that we sampled, it emerges that the average speaking time of the media's own journalists was nearly twice as great as the average speaking time of politicians (a hundred seconds as against sixty-one seconds). Moreover, interviewers are not discreet and deferential figures who ask their questions as if seeking information, and then retreat into the background while the politicians deliver their answers. The interviewers are regarded as grand figures in their own right. When Jeremy Paxman interviewed the political leaders, he occupied 30% of the total talking time. Interviewers like Paxman typically challenge politicians by outlining the counter-position. They are like hunters of embarrassment, pursuing lines of questioning that might discomfort the politician.

On news bulletins, the sound bites of the politicians are usually topped and tailed by the correspondents. The sound bites are typically preceded by an introduction and followed by an explanation which can last much longer than the intervening quotations, as if the words of the politicians cannot be transmitted unmediated. On the day the election
was announced, on Channel 4 News Jon Snow declared that throughout
the campaign his news would be 'cutting through the spin to bring you
the facts'. On all channels there are repeated examples of journalists
'writing themselves into the story' and in doing so telling us what the
'real' strategy was behind all the politicians' talk. The paradox is that
these specialists are often true enthusiasts of the political process. The
more they claimed to decode the strategies and straighten the spins,
however, and the more they moved centre stage on the news bulletins,
the more the politicians appeared as diminished figures, whose words
cannot be trusted.

Press evaluations
But what of occasions when journalists consciously sought to exert
political influence? It is frequently remarked that Britain has a highly
partisan national press. Yet comments of this kind tend to obscure
what are in fact more complex historical shifts in press alignment. The
decades after the Second World War saw a decline in 'deliberate
partisanship' in the national press. This trend reversed in the late
1970s and 1980s as the press de-camped (unequally) to various sides of
the ideological divisions between the Conservative Party of the Thatcher
era, the centre alliance parties and the new realists and old socialists of
Labour. In this more polarised political environment, the Conservative
gained a considerable advantage over their opponents. Whereas in 1974
the circulation gap between papers endorsing Conservative and Labour
was merely 18%, by the 1987 general election the Tories' advantage
had grown to 48%, falling back slightly to 43% in 1992.

Against this context, the realignment of the majority of press support
in 1997 behind Tony Blair and New Labour apparently marked a
dramatic reversal of an established political trend. Eleven out of the 19
national newspapers supported Labour, delivering the party a 30%
advantage in circulation terms. But even this 'sharp reversal of fortune'
pales in significance when compared with the editorial distributions in
2001, where 14 national newspapers endorsed Labour, delivering them
a phenomenal circulation lead over the Tories of 64%.

Construing partisanship simply in these aggregated and dichotomous
terms, however, tells a potentially misleading story, in which it is
assumed the propagandistic instincts of the recent past have remained
intact. In our view, this is not the case. The last two campaigns have
marked a significant qualitative change in press partisanship in Britain.
In 2001 the papers that declared for Labour were: Guardian, The
Times, Sun, Star, Mirror, Express, Observer, Financial Times, News of
the World, Sunday People, Sunday Mirror, Sunday Express and the
Sunday Times. The Conservatives were endorsed by only three titles:
Telegraph, Sunday Telegraph and Mail on Sunday. Three other
newspapers did not align explicitly with any party, but they were prepared
to make suggestions as to how their readers should vote to avoid worst-
case scenarios. The Independent remarked ‘we do not presume to recommend to our readers a vote for a particular party. But ... we conclude with regret that the Conservative Party on this occasion “does not deserve to be elected”’ (‘Why Britain Should Reject This Conservative Party’, Independent, 6.6.01, p. 3). In contrast, the election editorial in the Independent on Sunday recommended that its readers vote tactically ‘with sizeable votes for: Greens, Lib Dems—even for the same wing of the Tory Party’ as a means of averting a Labour landslide, promoting environment issues and puncturing ‘the unattractive self-esteem which the government seems to carry’ (‘The Downside of a Landslide’, Independent on Sunday, 3.6.01). Most remarkable of all was the Daily Mail’s conspicuous failure to convert its consistently corrosive critiques of New Labour into an explicit endorsement of the Conservatives. In its words: ‘Too often the [Conservative] Party as a whole seems timid, incoherent, lacking in the vision and confidence that once made Margaret Thatcher seem unstoppable’ (‘Use your Vote for Democracy’, Mail, 6.7.01, p. 10). As with the Independent on Sunday, it recommended tactical voting to prevent a Labour landslide.

It is tempting to see these three non-declarations as a case apart, but when one examines the tone and content of many of the other editorials in which a party affiliation was stated, a similar tone of reticence, and even disillusionment, about the political options available is evident. For example, the News of the World’s editorial emphasised the government’s underachievement in delivering improvements in education and the health service, and its failure to heed ‘issues that are the heart of every family in the land’ (‘Delivery, Delivery, Delivery’, News of the World, 3.6.01, p. 8). Similarly, The Times unprecedented decision to back Labour amounted to a ‘cautious’ endorsement, and was mentioned only in the penultimate paragraph of a nostalgic discussion about Thatcherism’s legacy (‘In our Time’, The Times, 5.6.01). The Sunday Express editorial was accompanied by a picture of caricatures of the three main party leaders wearing dunces’ hats under the headline ‘Blair wins our vote but has yet to win our trust’ (Sunday Express, 3.6.01, p. 38). In the Sunday Times judgment, Labour represented ‘the Least Worst Party ... It deserves to win with a reduced majority. Intelligent voters will cast their votes accordingly’ (Sunday Times, 3.6.01, p. 16). And if the Sun managed to muster a modicum of more editorial enthusiasm for Blair than in 1997, its final editorial still acknowledged the legitimacy of voting Conservative and the personal qualities of the Tory leader (‘A Conservative vote is not a wasted vote ... If Hague resigns tomorrow then we say this: A good man has fallen’, Don’t Let Us Down Tony, Sun, 7.6.01, p. 1).

Not all papers were so equivocal in assessing the parties’ respective credentials. The Mirror, Sunday Mirror and the People rallied more enthusiastically to Labour’s cause, just as the Sunday Telegraph, Daily Telegraph and Mail on Sunday declared a definite preference for the
Conservatives. The *Guardian* and *Observer* also declared firmly for Labour, if more conditionally than in 1997, as did the *Express* and *Star*. In the case of the *Express* this marked a considerable shift from its position in 1997 when it endorsed the Conservatives.

Just as commentators have identified the need to think of votes cast 'as though they are somewhere along a continuum from having definitely decided to vote for a particular party to having decided not to vote for a party at all',¹⁹ so press commitment to a party can range from staunch advocacy to the most tepid of endorsements. Furthermore, the more conditional a paper's support, the more attention needs to be paid to that scepticism rather than any political affiliation eventually conceded. If this is done, a different picture emerges of the shift in press alignment over recent elections than is suggested by global figures about party affiliation. In the 1992 campaign, most national papers expressed their party preferences in an explicit and unconditional way.² Only three titles (representing 12% of total circulation)²¹ displayed any significant degree of equivocation or scepticism in their stated political preferences. By 1997, this 'sceptic's circle' had widened, with many more national papers clouding their editorial declarations in caveats and qualifications. On this occasion seven papers (representing more than 40% of total circulation)²² seemed to founder between, on the one hand, a fear of Labour and, on the other, a loathing for the incumbent Conservative administration.²³ The 2001 campaign witnessed a further gravitation in national press opinion towards more ambivalent positions, with nine national papers (representing more than 50% of circulation)²⁴ either identifying significant failings in their party of choice or choosing not to state a preference. When viewed in this way, the main shift in national press affiliation since 1992 is not a dramatic inversion of an established partisan trend, or realignment, but rather a growing press dealignment, expressed as diffuse disenchantment with two major parties of uncertain and increasingly indistinguishable ideological hue.

These observations are primarily focused upon the final editorial declarations of the newspapers, and there are several reasons why these announcements deserve such an emphasis. Firstly, they represent an important indication of political power plays within specific media organisations. Apart from the obvious questions they raise about proprietorial control, they are traditionally the subject of considerable and protracted discussion among senior editorial staff. Secondly, editorial declarations often stimulate considerable media comment in other media sectors, particularly where a change in political allegiance occurs (witness the intense media discussion of the *Sun*'s declaration for Labour in 1997), which, in turn, offers yet another illustration of the growing significance of the media's role as arbiters of the political process. Finally, no journalist works in a political vacuum, and the
formation and elaboration of an editorial line often has a subtle but significant framing effect on other areas of editorial practice.

Yet for all these points, it is obvious that these editorial declarations represent just a drop in the ocean of press commentary that accompanies any modern election. Moreover, a lot of the contributions made by regular high-profile star columnists frequently advance arguments that contrast, even conflict, with the official editorial line. For example, whilst the Mirror's full-page editorial on polling day unreservedly allied itself to Blair's cause ('His ideals are the ideals of Mirror readers. His aims are our aims', Mirror, 7.6.01, p. 6), the following two pages were covered by a far more reserved assessment of Labour's performance by their political editor, Paul Routledge. On the same day the Sun's editorial ran alongside a lengthy piece by columnist Richard Littlejohn in which he suggested his readers vote Labour 'if you're happy with the sleaze, the lies, the stealth taxes, transport, the health service, asylum and really want another four years or more of it'. Alternatively, they should 'hold [their] nose and vote for the Tories' (Sun, 7.6.01, p. 8).

On at least one occasion, differences in political preferences among senior commentators erupted into open conflict among colleagues employed on the same paper. The day after Hugo Young wrote in the Guardian that the Liberal Democrats were the only party with 'moral authority', and Ros Coward announced her intention to vote for the Greens, Polly Toynbee openly attacked their stances as symptomatic of: a kind of decadence about the middle-class conscience that puts punishing the government for its moral failings above the reality of improvements in the real, hard lives of people struggling to get by ... This Labour government has also done great good, with more to come. That is something worth voting for (Guardian, 6.6.01).

But the fact that the growing cacophony of comment in the national press drowned out the papers' official editorial line strengthens the argument about the increased dealignment of the press in party political terms. These sorts of high-profile interventions add to the mixed messages already evident in many of the leader columns.

Conclusion

How much does all this matter? Preliminary evidence suggests few voters either made up or changed their minds during the campaign, and the evidence that any did so because of media coverage will be pored over by psephologists for some time to come. Preliminary survey evidence from MORI indicates a swing of 2% overall from Conservative to Labour during the campaign. This rises to 5.5% among Daily Mail readers and 6.5% among Guardian readers, though it is less dramatic elsewhere. However, whether this relates to the Mail's lukewarm endorsement of the Tories encouraging its Labour voting readers to keep their nerve, or whether Guardian Labour voters who were...
Press and Broadcasting

harbouring large doubts about the ideological shifts of Blair's New Labour nonetheless 'came back home' at the crunch, would require more analysis than the polling data reveals.

Campaigns are short and recurring interludes in the life of the body politic. They display intensified features of political communications in the longer term whose more enduring and persistent aspects almost certainly have a greater impact on political culture. Campaigns lasting a few weeks were originally designed to offer candidates an opportunity to declare their convictions and debate their intentions with a major part of their local electorates. But in the age of mass communication they may have become redundant; audiences have instant and extensive access to political offerings without awaiting their local community hall rally or doorstep encounter.

In the UK, the periods between elections foster a continuing definition by the media of issues, ideas, convictions, and solutions of greater moment than those fomented during the campaign. This may create a narrowing of available comment and analysis in which the predilections of the national press, in particular, support a range of opinions less radical than the switch of party allegiances since 1992 implies. As the Mirror Group's political editor suggests, 'In New Labour, Britain has a government which has followed the education, home affairs, and European policies of the Daily Mail and Sun', which he describes as an 'agenda set by a few right-wing newspapers'. Analytical focus on the campaign alone may not reveal all we need to know about the potency of the media in defining the civic culture of politics.

Nonetheless, the ritual of the election campaign has become its own justification, and its translation into popular culture by the media is our most recurrent indicator of the state of politics as a form of public discourse. The evidence we have presented speaks of a politics reduced to a few elemental issues, focused on a very limited range of key dominant personalities, and mediated as performance rather than policy. In his predictable complaint, Mr Blair may just have a point.

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3 The research was commissioned by the Guardian newspaper. The newspapers coded were the Sun, Mirror, Star, Daily Record, Express, Scotman, Financial Times, The Times, Guardian, Daily Telegraph and Independent. The broadcast news coded comprised: the BBC1 10pm news, ITN News at Ten, BBC2 Newsnight, Channel 4’s 7pm news, Channel 5’s 5.30 News, Sky News 9pm, BBC Radio 4’s 'Today' programme (7.20am-8.30am). The analysis began on 7 May and ended on 6 June. Research findings were published every Monday in the Guardian, and to meet the copy deadlines coding was restricted to weekday election coverage. For the newspapers, analysis was restricted to all hard news items and leader editorials found on the frontpages, designated home news sections, designated election segments or pages carrying leader editorials. Feature items or commentary pieces were not coded. An item was deemed to be 'election related' if there was any manifest reference made to the campaign. Our coding team were Katie MacMillan, Liz Sutton, Sue Beeker, Mike Fitchett, Jackie Goode, Diane Poppleton-Brown and Kate Rudley.
4 Levels of coverage in Channel 4 News were identical for 1997 and 2001. For BBC2 Newsnight, the amount of coverage was 18% down, for ITV News at Ten there was a 9% reduction, and BBC1 10pm news, a 25% reduction. The large decrease in BBC news coverage is mainly explained by the Corporation’s decision not to extend its main bulletin from 30 to 50 minutes, as it had in 1997.

5 D. Deacon et al., op. cit.


7 Ibid.


9 See the BBC producer guidelines (http://www.bbc.co.uk/lists/generalelection/index.shtml) and ITC Programme codes (http://www.itc.org.uk/regulating/prog_reg/prog_code/election_4.asp).

10 ‘Labour May Rethink Blair’s Backdrops’, Guardian, 10.5.01, p. 7.


12 In 1992 the founding aspects of the modern publicity process were already clearly evident (a ‘presidentialised’ campaign, an emphasis on spin and impression management, etc). Therefore, although the reductions between 1992 and 1997 may seem large, they represent a significant additional compression in what was already a highly pressurised process. Furthermore, the averages presented here cannot be compared directly with averages outlined in US studies (e.g. T. Patterson, Out of Order, Vintage, 1994, pp. 74-8). This is because our figures represent the total amount of speaking time a specific political source had in an individual news item. As such, these figures are in many cases based on an aggregation of sound-bite time, rather than the timing of individual speech acts.


21 The Financial Times, Star and Independent.


23 D. Deacon et al., op. cit.


25 See the British Election Survey (http://www.essex.ac.uk/bes/).

Executive Stressed
News Reporting of Quangos in Britain

David Deacon and Wendy Monk

This article examines a topic that has been neglected in political communication research: mainstream news reporting of the "appointive state" in Britain. This perspective is vital in the light of state retrenchment and an expanded role for quangos (quasi-autonomous nongovernmental organizations). The analysis provides an overview of long-term trends in media reporting of general principles of quasi government and an examination of the routine coverage of public bodies that can be classified as quangos. These related exercises show that the "new managerialist" ethos that fueled the recent expansion of the appointive state finds little endorsement in general media discourses about the quango state but is often implicitly reflected in journalists' treatment of specific organizations and their work.

Election campaign studies continue to cast a lengthy shadow across the field of political communication, even if, as Bob Franklin observes, they no longer constitute the "alpha and omega" of research activity (Franklin 1995:167). The enduring fascination with elections is partly due to their historical and ideological significance in the conduct of political business in democracies, but it also reflects their inherently dramatic features. Campaigns have always offered a tantalizing mix of initial uncertainty and eventual conclusiveness, with elite politicians locked in rhetorical battles for high stakes. Recent developments have only fueled academic interest—as political parties develop their promotional machinery, campaign periods now routinely feature the bloodiest encounters between journalists and growing legions of "spin doctors," press officers, publicists, and other impression managers (Blumler and Gurevitch 1995).

This continuing fixation with "voter persuasion" has been criticized by some. They claim that campaign-focused research tends to concentrate on atypical political periods, to be too limited in time scale, and to conceptualize both the political realm and the processes of political influence too narrowly. (For a useful review, see Nimmo and Swanson 1990.) This article is motivated in part by an additional query: Does the paradigm rest on outmoded assumptions about the significance of elections in political decision making in modern nation-states? In posing this question we are not echoing the views of those who dismiss elections as inherently vacuous rituals that offer nothing more than "a potent signal
of the essential powerlessness of political spectators" (Edelman 1988:97). Rather, we want to suggest that research into political communication must become attuned to the ramifications of recent changes in the structure and organization of governing institutions. As Ralph Negrine perceptively notes, "Little consideration is given to changes within the structures and processes of government which not only limit the effectiveness of the media but also raise important questions about the rationale for participation in the political system itself" (Negrine 1996:6). Our discussion here concentrates on developments in a British context, but its trends and implications resonate more widely.

From "Audience-Centered" Politics to the Politics of Appointment

Robert Denton and Gary Woodward point out that one of the central propositions of mainstream political communication research is that political communication is a purposive "audience-centered" activity (1990). In most formulations, this translates into the assumption that political power depends on winning and maintaining the consent of citizens—"the ultimate source of the policy-makers' authority" (Hennessy 1966:16). Elections are the key mechanisms by which the members of the public deliver their verdicts, which raises two related matters. The first concerns the conduct of these processes: Do they encourage democratic participation and support informed choice and understanding of the options available? The second concerns their jurisdiction: What areas of state activity are directly accountable to citizens via elections? To date, many researchers have been so fixated with the former matter that they have neglected to consider the latter. They simply take for granted that elections retain their significance as the bedrock of government. Yet over the last twenty years, there has been a major reconfiguration in state activity in Britain, one consequence of which has been to erode the jurisdiction of the electorate. As Chris Skelcher observes,

Ideology and pragmatism have combined to reshape the British governmental system by introducing a class of organizations having considerable public significance yet remaining outside democratic political activity. These are quangos—quasi-governmental bodies that are appointed rather than elected and have responsibility for shaping, purchasing, delivering and adjudicating across the arenas of public policy. Quangos are to be found playing a key role in almost every area of public policy and service delivery. Whether in health, education, agriculture or science policy, they are now an integral part of the British state and have replaced elected authorities as the natural home for the governance and management of public purpose. (1998:1, emphasis added)
The figures related to the expansion of quasi government in Britain are remarkable. According to one recent estimate, there are 6,424 executive and advisory quangos in the United Kingdom (Weir and Hall 1996), which control a collective budget of £60.4 billion—representing a 45 percent real term increase since 1979 and a third of all public expenditure. Most of this expansion has been at the local and regional levels, where local appointees now comfortably outnumber locally elected politicians (Davis 1996:2). Crucially, this growth seems to be continuing. In its first year in office, the government of Prime Minister Tony Blair commissioned 192 new task forces, policy review bodies, and advisory groups (Platt 1998). The reasons for the expansion reflect the increasingly diverse and recondite administrative demands of government (see Cabinet Office/OPS 1997: chap. 2), as well as the emergence and dominance of a new “managerialist” ethos in the U.K. public sector, which has encouraged “the deconstruction of large public bureaucracies and their reemergence as a multiplicity of smaller bodies in contractual and market-type relationships with each other” (Skelcher 1998:2). As Lesley Grayson and Howard Davis explain, “The administration of public services has been increasingly privatized in the interests of efficiency and effectiveness, and in the belief that private sector solutions to service delivery are intrinsically superior to those of the public sector” (1996:1). In this context, politicians have been corralled into “the role of strategic policy makers” (Skelcher 1998).

This encroachment of appointed political power at the expense of elected political authority has led many to identify a deepening “democratic deficit” in British politics, in which many areas of government are becoming less accountable to the public and its elected representatives in Parliament. For example, according to Paul Hirst, “Quangos are a means of farming out government functions based on distrust of the public, the belief that they are best left as passive consumers, and a belief that administrative accountability through management procedures is preferable to democratic control” (1995:358). These concerns have been increased by allegations about governments’ systematic abuse of patronage in many areas: selecting appointees on the basis of their political docility rather than their merit (Cook 1995). Much has also been said about the secrecy of many quasi-governmental bodies, whose decision making has often occurred behind closed doors. Disquiet remains in many quarters on this matter (e.g., Weir and Beetham 1999:197, 211) despite recent government initiatives designed to facilitate greater public access to quangos (Cabinet Office/OPS 1997) and to develop “practical arrangements” to increase the accountability of public agencies to Parliament (e.g., Cabinet Office/Treasury 1997).

The relevance of these debates to political communication research is highlighted by Negrine:

The accountability of such bodies to the public is an issue that draws in the old ‘watchdog’; the media... Increasingly such specialist bodies—and they
may be concerned with nothing more serious than sporting or cultural activities—take over important tasks, and governments could not function without their help. But the processes of delegation impact on those areas, which can be open to citizen influences. As the lines of responsibility get blurred, broken or elongated, as the chains of command shift away from arenas of political responsibility, the realm of citizens' control via their political representatives and/or via the mass media as 'watchdog' shrink. (1996:7)

It is significant that the media's role in monitoring appointive government and informing public opinion—and the barriers that they encounter in fulfilling these tasks—are often acknowledged in the academic and policy literature in this area. For example, in an earlier edited collection of essays on quangos in Britain, Anthony Barker briefly discusses the media's role in the late 1970s in reflecting and stimulating discussion around quasi-governmental agencies (Barker 1982:219–225), and this theme is revisited in reviews of trends in the 1990s (e.g., Grayson and Davis 1996:5; Skelcher 1998:36, 85–86). A recent government Green Paper on "Opening Up Quangos" identified press releases as an important mechanism by which the public could be informed about these public bodies, especially the appointment process (Cabinet Office/OPS 1997, chap. 3:3). In a review of changing trends in parliamentary reporting, Negrine asks, "With so many Non-Departmental Public Bodies (NDPBs) in existence, is a debate in parliament more worthy than an investigation into a regional health authority?" (1996:61).

Despite these recurrent allusions to the media's role, to date there has been no systematic investigation into media reporting of appointed public bodies and no analysis of their communication strategies and exchange relationships with media professionals. What commentary there is remains either anecdotal or at the level of assertion. The aim of this article is to start to redress this absence by presenting preliminary findings from a large-scale investigation into the relations between quangos and the mainstream news media in Britain, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council. Specifically, the article presents the conclusions of a systematic content analysis of quango-related news reporting, as a first stage in the appraisal of the media's performance in reporting and monitoring these public bodies. Before presenting the detail of this research, it is necessary to state how we defined quasi-autonomous nongovernmental organizations for the purposes of this study.

A Matter of Definition

Defining quangos in a British context is a matter of considerable and ongoing dispute. The confusion partly lies in the imprecision of the term (see Barker 1982:219–25), partly in the improvised nature of the British government,
which has long confounded stable categorization (Weir 1996), and crucially because "quango counting" is such a contentious political matter. For example, a highly restricted definition of *quasi government* (i.e., only officially "recognized" public bodies, such as executive and advisory nondepartmental bodies and tribunals) suggests a steady annual reduction in appointive government in Britain since the early 1980s (see Cabinet Office 1999:1), which paints a highly expedient picture for certain political sources.  

This study adopted an extensive definition of *quasi government*, drawing on the encompassing classification proposed by Brian Hogwood (1995). The research covers media representation of "recognized" and "nonrecognized" agencies. Most nonrecognized quangos are "local public spending bodies", and National Health Service (NHS) bodies, but we also include organizations that are mentioned in official lists of "public bodies" and display some of the classic qualities of appointive government (e.g., an "arm's length" relationship with central government and statutory powers with no direct electoral mandate) but are excluded from other extensive quango definitions (e.g., Weir and Hall 1996; Skelcher 1998). These additional agencies are next-step agencies, official regulators, nationalized industries, and public corporations (e.g., the BBC and the Bank of England). Overseas or supranational agencies that might be categorized as "quangos" (e.g., the European Commission) are excluded.

We adopted a broad definition of appointive government for several reasons. First, we wanted to explore and compare the extent of reporting across "recognized" and "nonrecognized" sectors. Second, as it is nonrecognized agencies that are at the root of the expansion of appointive government, it would have been remiss to ignore media representations of these emergent governmental forms. Third, a preliminary analysis of selected media reports revealed that journalists apply the term *quango* widely and unpredictably. For example, we found several instances when the Office of Standards in Education was referred to with this label, despite its official designation as a nonministerial government department. Similarly, the "Q word" was also affixed to the Child Support Agency, even though it is a next-step agency. Fourth, we are far more convinced by the theoretical arguments for an extensive definition of quangos. Appointive government in Britain has an amorphous quality, often changing shape in response to the political forces exerted upon it. Because of this, defining it is rather like trying to pick up a blancmange: If you want to capture its essence and form, it's far better to cup your hands than to grasp tightly.

The *National Press and Principles of Appointive Government*

The first objective of this news media analysis was to examine how much media attention was given to what we term "principles of appointive government." By this we mean coverage of any of the broader political, constitutional, and
Executive Stressed

democratic issues raised by the expansion of quasi government in Britain. For logistic reasons, this part of the analysis was restricted to an examination of a selection of national newspapers, using on-line and CD-ROM archives. Therefore, we need to be cautious about extrapolating these findings across all media. Nevertheless, these longitudinal data raise interesting questions about the shifting focus of media debates about quasi government over the last decade.

As an obvious departure point, we counted the number of press items that used the term quango (or variants thereof) on a yearly basis. Figure 1 quantifies explicit national press references made to the "Q word" between 1988 and 1997 and reveals significant fluctuations, with considerably more frequent use occurring between 1994 and 1995. There is also evidence of interpress variation, as the Guardian referred to "quangos" far more regularly than other papers from 1993 onward, and its peak usage predates the others' (i.e., occurring in 1994 rather than 1995). By comparison, the term appears to have had little currency with the more popular (and populist) tabloids. Although this evidence suggests that quangos moved up the national news agenda between 1994 and 1995, it does not necessarily follow that press attention to principles of appointive government grew during this period. The fluctuations could simply reflect a transient adoption of the term in a descriptive sense, as a way of labeling particular sorts of public agencies. To establish whether these data highlight a "critical discourse moment" (Gamson 1992) in relation to quasi government requires closer analysis of these newspaper items. For this we concentrated on reports in the Guardian and the Daily Telegraph, as these were the broadsheet titles that respectively displayed the greatest and least propensity for referring to "quangos."

Figure 1
We first assessed how many of these articles were *mainly* focused on principles of appointive government. For the *Daily Telegraph*, increased use of the term *quango* in 1995 only marginally corresponded to a greater emphasis on reporting these metadimensions (2 articles in 1992, 14 items in 1995, and 4 items in 1997). In contrast, the peak in the *Guardian*’s references to quangos mirrored a significant increase in items mainly focused on wider political, economic, and constitutional matters related to quasi government (2 articles in 1992, 67 articles in 1994, and 17 articles in 1997).

As a supplementary exercise, we examined patterns of association in the wording of these press items—counting the number of times the term *quango* appeared in the same article as several key phrases that recur in academic and political debates about quasi government (i.e., “accountable/accountability/unaccountable,” “democratic/democracy/undemocratic,” and “elected/unelected/nonelected”). A comparison of their convergence in *Guardian* and *Telegraph* coverage over selected years again reveals clear differences (Table 1). In 1992, these additional keywords only rarely appeared in “Q-word coverage” in either newspaper. However, in 1994 and 1995, a large disparity is evident, with these lexical intersections occurring nearly six times more frequently in the *Guardian* than in the *Telegraph*. In 1997, these keyword associations still occurred more regularly in the *Guardian*, but their incidence reduced overall, as did the differential between the two papers (see in particular the links between “quango*” and “elected/unelected/nonelected”). Although some of these keyword associations may be spurious, the results tend to confirm that in 1994 and 1995, the *Guardian* developed a considerably greater interest in principles of appointive government than at least one of its major competitors, but its attentiveness wavered over subsequent years.

Despite these quantitative variations, there was a striking qualitative similarity in the frames of reference typically adopted by all national newspapers when reporting on general issues related to the “quango-state.” Table 2 provides a selection of national press headlines from 1994 that reveal consistently negative views of the operation and expansion of quasi government. These articles are typical of almost all other press items found on this subject during this period. For all newspapers, the story of the rise of the “quangoid” state was about growing unaccountability, the abuse of patronage, inefficiency, secrecy, and general duplicity. Defenses of appointive government were conspicuous by their virtual absence.

This highly negative discursive frame has precedents. In the mid- to late 1970s, a spate of national press articles appeared that articulated similar concerns about the spread of quasi-governmental agencies. These shared an image “of quangos as something disreputable” (Stott 1995:327) and fueled a political debate that culminated in an official review (Pliatsky 1980) and several high-profile “quango culls” (Holland 1982). Looking farther back, such themes also
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<tr>
<td>&quot;Quango*&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;Accountable&quot;</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>42</td>
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<td>&quot;Accountability&quot;</td>
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<td>&quot;Unaccountable&quot;</td>
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<tr>
<td>&quot;Quango*&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;Democratic&quot;</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>37</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>&quot;Quango*&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;Elected&quot;</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>88</td>
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<td>76</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>29</td>
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<td></td>
<td>&quot;Unelected&quot;</td>
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<td>&quot;Nonelected&quot;</td>
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Table 2
Selected headlines from national press articles mainly focusing on principles of appointive government, 1994

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Newspaper</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Headline</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Daily Mail</td>
<td>3/25/94</td>
<td>Why Do We Allow Quangos to Subvert Society?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5/23/94</td>
<td>Quango Explosion: Groups Draining a Third of All Public Cash</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>11/2/94</td>
<td>Tories Pack the Quango Gravy Train</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>12/21/94</td>
<td>King of Quangoland: Farmer Puts in 8 Day Week on String of Public Bodies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daily Mirror</td>
<td>12/21/94</td>
<td>King of Quangos: He Works 370 Days Every Year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>12/29/94</td>
<td>Quangos Scandal: Tories Brace Themselves for &quot;Cash for Quangos&quot; Allegations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observer</td>
<td>3/20/94</td>
<td>Local Voices Cry Out in the Quango Wilderness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3/20/94</td>
<td>Why Do We Allow Quangos to Subvert Society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7/3/94</td>
<td>Invisible Army of the Quango Marches On</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>10/23/94</td>
<td>Monte Carlo Tory's £70,000 Quango Jobs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>11/6/94</td>
<td>Exposed: Scale of Tory Cash Link to Quango Jobs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daily Telegraph</td>
<td>2/14/94</td>
<td>Critics Demand a Roll Call to Bring the Quango to Heel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4/23/94</td>
<td>Labour Pledges to Control Quangos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>11/2/94</td>
<td>Tory Spouses Hold 24 Quango Jobs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Times</td>
<td>1/25/94</td>
<td>Spending Watchdog Turns on Quangos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5/23/94</td>
<td>Quango Explosion &quot;Undermines Essential Democratic Scrutiny&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7/8/94</td>
<td>Redwood Seeks to Tame Welsh Quangos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent</td>
<td>3/17/94</td>
<td>Quangos Prosper Amid Secrecy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5/22/94</td>
<td>Welcome to Quangoland: Now There is a Quango for Every 10,000 People</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>9/23/94</td>
<td>Bringing Democracy to the Quangocracy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>11/14/94</td>
<td>Left and Right Join in Attack on Quangos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guardian</td>
<td>8/15/94</td>
<td>Time to Defy Those Quangos We Don't Trust</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>10/27/94</td>
<td>Public Accounts Committee Finds Decline in Standards of Integrity among Quango Appointees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>12/9/94</td>
<td>Business Chiefs Attack Growth of Unelected Quangos</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

resonate with deeper historical antagonisms toward unelected political authority. Take, for example, Charles Dickens’s disparaging portrayal of an education inspector in Hard Times:

A mighty man at cutting and drying, he was; a government officer; in his way (and in most other people’s too), a professed pugilist; always in training, always with a system to force down the general throat like a bolus, always to be heard of at the bar of his little public office, ready to fight all England . . . . He was certain to knock the wind out of common sense, and
render that unlucky adversary deaf to the call of time. And he had it in charge from high authority to bring about the great public office millennium, when Commissioners should reign upon the earth. (1994:4–5)

What caused national press interest in the quango state to revive in the early 1990s? An obvious reason was the significant acceleration in the expansion of appointive government from the late 1980s onward, which was unprecedented in both its rapidity and its scale (Skelcher 1998:8–9). These significant material changes in turn spurred debate within academic and policy networks about their collective implications, which then fed into other public arenas, including the media. An early influential intervention came in a report by the European Policy Forum (Stewart et al. 1992), which identified the emergence of a “new magistracy” in local government in Britain that was highly elitist and essentially unaccountable to local citizens. Similar concerns were forcefully articulated from other academic and political sources, such as the Democratic Audit of the United Kingdom, a collaborative project involving the Human Rights Center at Essex University, the Joseph Rowntree Trust, and the Charter 88 Trust (see Weir and Hall 1994).

By 1993, the debate also started to gain parliamentary momentum. There was a large increase in the number of parliamentary questions that members asked about the expansion of appointive state agencies, and the House of Commons Public Accounts Committee began to investigate allegations of mismanagement in several nonelected agencies. The main opposition party also began to campaign strongly on the issue. In early 1994, Labour’s trade and industry spokesperson alleged that £60 was lost by quangos and central government in “fraud, corruption and serious mismanagement” for every £1 lost in local government, and later that year the shadow environment secretary launched a “quango watch” campaign to monitor the activities of unelected bodies. As the debate shifted from peripheral to central “leadership arenas” (Seymour-Ure 1987), it was not surprising that the levels of media attention began to increase.

The event that really drove the issue to the foreground came at the end of 1994, when serious allegations of political “sleaze” blew up around John Major’s administration. At first, the controversy involved bribery allegations against several ministers and members of Parliament (MPs), but the formal inquiry set up to examine standards in public life was extended to include quangos (Nolan Report 1995). This development provided a strong news peg for the issue (Dunleavy et al. 1995) and helps explain why “Q-word” usage rose for most newspapers in 1995. It also helps account for the Guardian’s greater use of the term quango and its more detailed interest in constitutional matters related to the appointive state at this stage. This was the paper that broke the most damaging allegations about governmental sleaze in October 1994, that became a key political player in the controversy in its own right, and that had the greatest interest in exploring the controversy’s broadening implications.11


The media were not just passive witnesses to the emerging political debate around the expansion of appointive government. Following the publication of the European Policy Forum report in 1992, the *Financial Times* produced its own "quango count" to demonstrate the proliferation of these public agencies, which was in turn widely cited by other media and political sources. The following year, the *Independent on Sunday* ran a "Quangowatch" feature over twelve consecutive weeks that offered "a new guide to those unelected quasi-autonomous nongovernmental organizations that run our lives." Coincidentally, the *Observer* compiled a list of the highest payments made to political appointees during the previous year. In November 1994, the BBC's *Here and Now* program conducted an investigation into instances in which spouses of Tory MPs and Peers had been appointed to quango boards.

Overall, it appears the range of press coverage of principles of appointive government became far more limited as it intensified (Dunleavy et al. 1995). From 1993, the debate quickly shifted from general discussions of structural deficiencies in the accountability of these public agencies to more "personalized" accounts of political partisanship and financial irregularities.

What was it that made some papers more attentive to general questions about appointive government than others? In our view, you do not need to subscribe to crude editorial conspiracy theories to suggest that it was no accident that the centrist and center-left newspapers (the *Guardian*, *Observer*, *Independent* and *Independent on Sunday*, and *Financial Times*) gave greater prominence to these debates than their pro-Conservative competitors (the *Telegraph*, *Sunday Telegraph*, *Times*, and *Sunday Times*). Such were the negative implications of the quango controversy for the government; one would anticipate a greater receptivity among newspapers that were more critically disposed to the Conservative administration.13

If partisanship offers at least a partial explanation for the varying intensity in newspaper coverage of principles of appointive government in the early 1990s, it does not explain the political closure evident across all papers when these matters were addressed. Here it would seem that broader political factors overrode specific organizational dispositions. Apart from drawing on historical precedent, the negative framework of coverage probably also reflects the configuration of political debate at this time. In party political terms, a resurgent and reconstructed Labour Party under Blair was beginning to deliver some telling blows against an increasingly directionless, discredited, and divided government. Additionally, and crucially, the critics of the growth of appointive government did not divide along party political lines. Attacks emanated from across the political spectrum, which prevented the debate from being constructed in partisan terms. Such was the diversity and unanimity of critical commentary—backed by a growing weight of empirical evidence—that the government's counterresponses were quickly undermined, and in this context even staunchly pro-government newspapers were never likely to play the role of apologists.
Quangos as Contributors: Incidental Trends in Media Reporting

Manifest references to quangos and direct attention to principles of appointive government do not represent the sum of media coverage of quasi-governmental agencies in Britain. There are many occasions when organizations that can be classified as quangos receive media exposure but are not explicitly referred to by this term. The second phase of our content analysis involved analyzing a sample of media coverage in a more detailed way to look for these less demarcated instances of coverage. The sample extended across local and national newspaper and broadcast news media, over a composite sample period of four weeks in 1997. A news item was defined as “quango-related” if it either discussed principles of appointive government or made any clear reference to an agency that fell within our definition of a quango.

The Demography of Quango Reporting

The infrequency with which news reports focused on principles of appointive government and used the term quango became starkly evident from this stage of the research. Across the entire media sample, only five items were found that mainly concentrated on issues related to the quango state per se, and less than 1.5 percent of all the items used the term quango. Across all media, 3,354 separate quango-related news, feature, and editorial items were identified, mentioning 4,154 relevant organizations. (Note: Up to six quangos could be coded per item.) These figures suggest such organizations have a cumulatively high news presence, although such a claim needs a comparator. This is not easy to provide, as these statistics are inevitably a construct of the study’s specific sampling and coding procedures. However, one of the authors had previously conducted a content analysis of media reporting of voluntary and charitable organizations that adopted very similar coding and sampling strategies (Deacon 1999). Although there are obvious dangers in assuming direct parallels (identical time periods were not taken), there is at least the basis for a tenuous comparison that is suggestive. Taking coverage found in the Guardian newspaper for both sorts of organizations (the Guardian was found to carry the most items referring to quangos and voluntary organizations), the average figure of 13.4 quango-related items per edition comfortably exceeded the figure of 9.6 items for voluntary sector-related coverage. This differential—which was broadly sustained across most other media sectors—is even more remarkable given that approximately 350,000 organizations in the United Kingdom conform to a broad definition of voluntarism, compared to fewer than 7,000 agencies that would fall into the most inclusive of “quango counts.”

We also compared the quantitative distribution of different types of appointive governmental agencies in media coverage with their real-world nu-
merical distribution (Figure 2). In media terms, "executive power" won out over "advisory power," and national agencies dominated local and regional, particularly in national media coverage. Executive nondepartmental public bodies (part of the "recognized" quango sector) received the most frequent exposure, followed by "Public Corporations/Nationalized Industries," "Regulators," and "Next-Step Agencies." Although these last three categories are all, strictly speaking, "nonrecognized" quangos, they have strong governmental links and officially designated governmental roles. However, advisory nondepartmental public bodies were marginalized in coverage, which is significant when one considers their importance in modern British government. As Stuart Weir and David Beetham observe, "Advisory quangos form a near invisible layer of government which is at least as important, and possibly more so, than that of executive quangos" (1999:219). It would seem the news media play a key role in maintaining their public obscurity.

Perhaps what is most striking is the limited attention given to "nonrecognized" quangos, in particular "local public spending bodies." Although there was some disparity between the focus of national and local media, with locally and regionally oriented agencies attaining predictably greater exposure in local media, these general trends suggest an inconsistency between coverage of specific agencies and of quasi government in general. In the metadebate, there is a

![Figure 2](image-url)

Comparison of the Actual Proportional Distribution of Appointive Government Agencies and Their Proportional Presence in News Reports
widespread implicit assumption that the appointive state is out of control and in a state of rapid expansion. Yet when it comes to reporting agencies in action, the focus tends to fall mainly upon either the established (which have reduced in number over the last decade) "recognized" sector or other official agencies.

To some extent, this disjunction may be because media attention does not follow the numerical distribution of quasi-governmental agencies, but rather the extent of individual agencies' size and fiscal responsibilities. This would explain the dominance of national bodies over local bodies and the preeminence of executive agencies. For example, the gross annual expenditure of big-spending national executive agencies like the Further Education Funding Council for England (over £3 billion in 1997-98) would comfortably cover the aggregate expenditure of a considerable number of local public spending bodies. Table 3 compares the media prominence of particular executive NDPBs with their public presence and spending roles (as assessed by number of employees and gross expenditure).

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<tr>
<td>Arts Council</td>
<td>2,486</td>
<td>278</td>
<td>560</td>
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<tr>
<td>Monopolies and Mergers Commission</td>
<td>2,228</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>7</td>
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<td>British Museum</td>
<td>1,633</td>
<td>980</td>
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<td>English Heritage</td>
<td>1,572</td>
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<td>Tate Gallery</td>
<td>1,531</td>
<td>531</td>
<td>60</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sports Council</td>
<td>1,235</td>
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<td>385</td>
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<tr>
<td>Victoria and Albert Museum</td>
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<td>Millennium Commission</td>
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<td>Health and Safety Executive</td>
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<td>Commission for Racial Equality</td>
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<td>Equal Opportunities Commission</td>
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<tr>
<td>English Nature</td>
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<td>Higher Education Funding Council for England</td>
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<td>National Consumer Council</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gas Consumers Council</td>
<td>226</td>
<td>105</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
expenditure, respectively). The twenty agencies selected were the ones found to have had the most national media coverage between January 1, 1996, and December 31, 1998.\(^{15}\)

No obvious links emerge from this comparison. Several agencies of comparatively modest size and expenditure received considerable media exposure (e.g., the Monopolies and Mergers Commission and English Heritage), whereas other large and big spending NDPBs attracted far less attention (e.g., the Higher Education Funding Council for England [HEFCE]). Taking all the data into account, there were no statistically significant correlations between press exposure and these organizational factors. (Correlating “number of press items” and “gross annual expenditure” produced a nonsignificant coefficient of \(r = -0.1193\), correlating “number of press items” and “number of staff” revealed a nonsignificant coefficient of \(r = 0.2014\).)

It would seem that other factors influence the relative newsworthiness of quangos and appointive state sectors. One of the ongoing objectives of this research program will be to understand more clearly what these factors are.

**Credibility or Questionability?**

The more intensive stage of the content analysis also examined the specific treatment and evaluation of extragovernmental organizations in news items, feature articles, and editorials. Is it the case that the overwhelmingly negative framework evident in coverage of principles of appointive government translates into a recurrent skepticism, even hostility, in the reporting of particular agencies at work?

We began by mapping the parameters of media coverage, quantifying the most common themes in quango-related coverage. Up to four themes could be coded per item, and they ranged across the ten macro groupings set out in Table 4. All of these aligned with two general orientations in quango-related news reporting. The first is whether the topic mainly concerns specific matters related to individual public organizations or general matters concerning principles of appointive government. Some themes can have both a specific and a general focus. The second vector concerns the focus of each theme. *Internal* thematic groupings relate to debates that essentially look inward on quasi government: examining, whether specifically or generally, its internal workings and structures (e.g., what procedures are there for ensuring accountability? How do appointment procedures work? What constitutes a quango?). *External* themes concern those debates that are “outward looking,” that explore the engagement of appointive public bodies in a broader political context, making decisions and interventions that have an impact on other public- and private-sector sources (e.g., criticizing the actions of a business or introducing new regulations on some public policy matter). Here again, some categories can have both an internal and an external orientation.
### Table 4
Thematic groupings in media coverage of appointive government

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Thematic Grouping</th>
<th>Examples</th>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Orientation</th>
<th>Coded</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Estimations</td>
<td>Research evidence related to &quot;quango counting&quot;, assumptions about the increase, reduction, or stability of appointive government</td>
<td>General</td>
<td>Internal</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Definitions</td>
<td>Comparisons and evaluations of restricted and nonrestricted definitions; discussion of the meaning of the acronym quango.</td>
<td>General</td>
<td>Internal</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accountability</td>
<td>Specific/general openness of quangos to general public; accountability to Parliament and other public/private agencies</td>
<td>General</td>
<td>Internal, specific</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appointments</td>
<td>Issues related to patronage; recruitment patterns to public agencies</td>
<td>General</td>
<td>Internal, specific</td>
<td>306</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independence</td>
<td>Allegations of partisanship; independence of public bodies from external pressures and influences</td>
<td>General</td>
<td>Internal, external</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsibilities</td>
<td>Creation, abolition, or redefinition of specific quangos; discussions about the changing public roles and responsibilities of these agencies</td>
<td>Specific</td>
<td>Internal</td>
<td>667</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other administration</td>
<td>Pay levels in public agencies; agencies' performance and effectiveness; cost efficiency; maladministration</td>
<td>Specific</td>
<td>Internal</td>
<td>944</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other external relations</td>
<td>Other conflicts, partnerships, links with public/private institutions that do not specifically touch upon an agency's independence</td>
<td>Specific</td>
<td>Internal/ external</td>
<td>169</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decisions</td>
<td>Decisions and actions of public bodies; regulatory and advisory roles</td>
<td>Specific</td>
<td>External</td>
<td>1,694</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interventions</td>
<td>Participation in political debates with external sources; comments on broad matters of public and political debate (where these require no formal actions or decisions on behalf of the quango)</td>
<td>Specific</td>
<td>External</td>
<td>1,520</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
From Table 4, we can see that two thematic categories stand out, both of which are external and specific in their broad orientation. The largest is decisions, which covers reports of the judgments, deliberations, and actions of these public agencies. The second is interventions, which covers those occasions when quangos are reported as being engaged in a public debate with some other public or private source but are not actually instigating any formal action or decision. The next two most prominent themes are internal in their orientation but remain specific in focus. Other administration concerns occasions when any internal administrative procedures of specific agencies were reported, aside from the appointment process. Responsibilities cover reports that address the changing and developing roles and responsibilities of specific agencies.

These findings also support our earlier deductions that media attentiveness to principles of appointive government is unusual and sporadic. Note the relative marginalization of themes related to independence and accountability and, in particular, the virtual absence of coverage of themes related to estimations and definitions. Note as well how the themes in news reporting cluster around the external rather than the internal politics of quangos: charting their actions, comments, and decisions in relation to other political institutions and sources. Routine media reporting of these agencies appears to have a predominantly exterior gaze.

These findings give some sense of the general interpretive priorities of quango-related news coverage but little insight into its evaluative dimensions. For example, the discovery that a large proportion of coverage focuses on the decisions and actions of quangos tells us nothing about how these are presented. Are they commonly reported positively, as authoritative and perspicacious, or negatively, as examples of autocratic and unaccountable governance? These dimensions are not easy to assess systematically, as many journalists avoid overt position taking, particularly in straight news and current affairs reporting. Even so, the selective and prominent quotation of either critics or supporters in individual reports can either erode or underline the legitimacy of a particular decision or action. To assess these dimensions, we developed a six-point evaluation scale that was used with all main theme categories. When applied to the decisions category, the scale differentiated between

- Instances in which a quango’s decisions or actions were solely described in an item—no explicit evaluations were present (whether in the form of direct comment made by the item author or by any quoted sources in the text)
- Instances in which evaluations accompanied the description of a quango’s decisions or actions (whether in terms of direct comment by the item author or by a quoted source in the text) and these comments were solely or mainly supportive of the reported decisions or actions
- Instances in which commentary accompanied the description of a quango’s decisions or actions and these comments were solely or mainly critical of the reported decisions or actions
Instances in which commentary accompanied the description of a
quango's decisions or actions and these comments displayed "genuine"
balancing (i.e., neither critical nor supportive views prevail; the item
suggests an equivocal position)

We found that 14 percent of the themes coded in relation to decisions
displayed a negative or critical slant. Although this exceeded the occasions on which
quango decisions or actions were endorsed (9 percent of cases), both were
dwarfed by the number of occasions on which agencies' decisions and actions
were presented solely in a descriptive way, with no direct commentary apparent
in either direction (70 percent of cases). In the majority of cases, quango actions
and decisions were neither lauded nor deplored, just noted and recorded.

Conclusions

Several clear trends emerge from this preliminary analysis of media reporting of
the appointive state in Britain. The news media only sporadically pay attention
to what we have termed "principles of appointive government"—that is, the
broader constitutional, procedural, and democratic issues raised by the expansion
of quasi-governmental agencies. The last period of significant media scrutiny came in 1994–95 as a consequence of a range of factors and political inter­ventions, in particular the controversy over political sleaze that blew up around
the government at that time. Certain media sectors were more interested in
debates about principles of appointive government than others, but all coverage
in this area shared a negative frame of reference. In particular, coverage at this
stage focused around the issue of the abuse of patronage. More recently, media
interest in the general issues concerning a "quango-state" has cooled.

Despite this sporadic attention to these broad debates, in routine news cov­erage quangos seem to command a considerable cumulative presence, being
more frequently reported than other extragovernmental sources. However, the
reporting of specific quangos and their work tends to cluster in several respects,
particularly at the national level. Executive and regulatory agencies command
the lion's share of media attention, with nonrecognized local public spending
bodies and advisory bodies being conspicuously sidelined. Furthermore, cover­age is unevenly distributed across executive agencies, concentrating around a
dozens agencies, then falling away rapidly for the rest. Overall, routine cover­age of specific agencies concentrates more on agencies' exterior actions than on
their internal politics and operations.

The results also highlight an inconsistency in media treatment of quasi gov­ernment. Although wider media discourses about the appointive state are almost
entirely negative, this does not translate into a routine hostility in the treatment
of specific agencies and their work. Quangos are most commonly portrayed in a
descriptive, unconnected, and uncontested manner—engaged in public debate, but not in a way that draws them directly into the political fray. In many respects, this feature of media coverage replicates the "new managerialist" ideologies advanced to legitimize the existence of these public bodies—such as that they enable complex policy matters to be dealt with in dedicated arenas of expertise and reduce the distorting impact short-term party political maneuvering can have on rational policy formulation and implementation. For many journalists, "arm's length government" seems to warrant "arm's length coverage."

These conclusions in turn raise a range of questions that can only be mentioned here. Central among these is reconciling the high levels of routine coverage with the popular image of quangos as inherently and inevitably secretive agencies that, because they are appointed to power, are deemed to lack any incentive to communicate their views publicly. Is it likely that this amount of reporting can be attributed solely to the perseverance and initiative of journalists in seeking out information from these agencies? This seems improbable in view of the limited internal scrutiny of quasi-governmental bodies found in the content analysis and what we know more generally about the increased competitiveness among political institutions for media attention. This in turn suggests that some quangos at least are more publicity oriented than many of the discussions around the secretive quango state would have us believe (e.g., Marr 1995). However, if this is the case, what are their motivations for courting media exposure? Do they reveal an altruistic commitment to open government or other political objectives (some of which may be compatible with restricting and controlling external scrutiny)? Additionally, how widespread are promotional inclinations and activities across the sector? Our research finds that coverage tends to bunch around an elite band of agencies, but it is not possible to judge from this evidence to what extent this is due to uneven or limited publicity investment across the sector or to the mainstreaming effect of journalists' news gathering. These matters can only be addressed by moving beyond the texts to talk to journalists and representatives from these public bodies directly. If nothing else, the results from this media analysis suggest that the exchange relationships between quangos and journalists are more complex and contradictory than many seem to suppose and are probably as much characterized by tacit complicity as they are by open conflict.

Notes

An earlier version of this article was presented to the Press and Politics Panel at the annual conference of the Political Studies Association, University of Nottingham, March 1999.

1. Grant reference R000236953.

2. The term nondepartmental public body (NDPB) was first coined in an official review of quangos in the late 1970s (Platts 1980). It is used to define agencies that are not formally part of government departments but are directly involved in one of the following:
Executive Stressed

- Advising government ("advisory NDPBs"—e.g., the Spongiform Encephalopathy Advisory Committee)
- Delivering public services and fulfilling other public functions and activities ("executive NDPBs"—e.g., the Commission for Racial Equality, the Environment Agency, the Competition Commission)
- Fulfilling quasi-judicial or monitoring roles ("tribunals" and "boards of visitors"—e.g., the Rent Assessment Panel for Scotland)

3. The label local public spending body was coined by the Nolan Committee in 1995. It applies to the plethora of local and regional agencies that emerged and expanded their functions during the 1980s and early 1990s. Included under this label are police authorities, training and enterprise councils, housing associations, career service companies, city technology companies, grant-maintained schools, further education corporations, and higher education corporations.

4. Next-step agencies are part of their originating government departments (unlike NDPBs) but have devolved responsibilities for the enactment and delivery of departmental policies and services. All next-step agencies have their own chief executive and staff (although they are classified as civil servants) and are currently responsible for delivering three-quarters of central government services (Weir and Beetham 1999:195). Examples include the Prison Service and the Benefits Agency.

5. These agencies variously regulate the recently privatized utilities (water [OFWAT], electricity [OFFER], telecommunications [OFTEL], etc.) and supervise the national lottery (OFLOT) and the primary and secondary education system (OFSTED). They are formally designated as government departments in their own right but have no minister in charge (hence their designation as nonministerial government departments).

6. Following the privatization campaigns of the late 1980s, few nationalized industries remain. Current examples include British Nuclear Fuels Limited and the Civil Aviation Authority.

7. We were conscious that the inclusion of the BBC, as a mainstream media organization in its own right, could lead to a flooding of our research. Therefore, we only coded items that referred to the institutional politics of the corporation. By this we mean coverage of strategic and political matters affecting the organization (e.g., funding, the appointment of senior personnel, marketing initiatives, political contacts with external sources, debates about future programming initiatives, etc.). References to specific program content and routine scheduling matters were excluded from the analysis.

8. Electronic archives were only available for the Mail and Daily Mirror from 1993 and 1994, respectively.


11. A significant amount of the quango-related coverage in the Guardian in 1994 appeared at the end of the year after the sleaze scandal broke. More than half of the Guardian articles that mainly focused on principles of appointive government in 1994 appeared during the last ten weeks of the year, as did 32 percent of the articles that made manifest references to quangos.

12. In this context, it is interesting to note that the upswing in Telegraph use of the "Q-word" in 1997 was mainly due to more frequent usage after Labour's electoral victory in May 1997 (see Figure 1). Moreover, most of the items in the Telegraph in 1997 that contained keyword associations between "quango" and other terms related to principles of appointive government appeared after the Conservative Party's defeat.

13. Sampling began on Monday, March 11, 1997, and every eighth day of coverage was sampled until the twenty-eighth day (October 13, 1997). We analyzed coverage in the following: all national daily and Sunday newspapers; the main evening news bulletins on
Deacon and Monk

BBC1, ITV, and Channel 4; BBC2 Newsnight; BBC Radio 1’s Newsbeat; four local daily newspapers from our local sample regions of Leicestershire, Cumbria, South Wales, and East Anglia; and the early evening BBC and ITV regional news programs from these sample areas (Central News, BBC East Midlands Today, Anglia News East, BBC Look East, Border News, BBC North-West Tonight, BBC Wales Today, and Wales Tonight).

14. For instance, a broad and inclusive definition of voluntarism was used, and the criterion for defining an item as "voluntary sector-related" was identical to that used in the quango study (i.e., if a story featured an organization that fell within the definition of voluntarism, then the item was included). Additionally, a rolling twenty-eight-day sample was compiled, taking every eighth day from a commencement date of October 26, 1992.

15. This media "top twenty" involved a multistage analysis. A "candidate list" of the thirty most frequently mentioned agencies was derived from the more intensive national and local media sample. A keyword search was then conducted for each organization using CD-ROM archives of a wide range of national newspapers over a three-year period. (The newspapers sampled between January 1, 1996, and December 31, 1998, were the Daily Telegraph, Sunday Telegraph, Times, Sunday Times, Independent, and Independent on Sunday.) From this we compiled a list of the twenty most reported executive NDPBs, noting the total number of articles in which each one appeared.


18. For example, Christian Wolmar, "Head of Plymouth Quango Plundered Funds for Jaunts," Independent, Apr. 9, 1997:5.


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Local Government Studies, University of Birmingham.

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Quangos and the 'Communications Dependent Society'
Part of the Process or Exceptions to the Rule?

David Deacon and Wendy Monk

ABSTRACT

This article examines the public communication activities of quasi-autonomous non-governmental organizations ('quangos') in Britain, paying particular attention to their media relations. The analysis shows that the popular image of these public bodies as highly introverted organizations needs revision, as many place considerable emphasis on public communication issues. However, this recognition contextualizes rather than invalidates concerns about accountability within this tier of government, as publicity activities in the sector are geared towards facilitating the external promotion of organizations' roles rather than scrutiny of their conduct.

Key Words journalism, news sources, political communication, public relations, quangos

Introduction

There is a growing appreciation that political communication processes in many western political systems are being transformed. Due to broader political, social and economic changes, a diverse range of public and private organizations and institutions are professionalizing their public
communication activities (Wernik, 1991), and, in particular, recognizing and accommodating the pivotal role of the media in the conduct of formal political business (Mazzolena and Schultz, 1999). According to Blumler and Gurevitch (1996) this constitutes the emergence of a 'communications dependent society':

... the publicity system of many advanced democracies has become a power-brokering sphere ... media attention is a vital source of potential influence and power, creating perceptions of key events, issues and distributions of public support that policy-makers must heed. Politicians, pressure groups and other would-be opinion-makers must therefore give much higher priority to the publicity field, recognizing 1) that it is a competitive arena, in which many rivals are also seeking footholds and 2) that it is dominated by the standards of journalism to which their own media-directed material must conform. (Blumler and Gurevitch, 1996: 127)

But if there is broad consensus about the existence of these processes (and recognition that they are more advanced in some political systems than others), there is less agreement about their implications. For some commentators the expansion of 'rationalized techniques of persuasion born of advertising, market research, and public relations' (Mayhew, 1997: 4) has created a crisis in 'civic communication' in which cynicism abounds and the needs of citizens are being 'confounded and frustrated' (Blumler and Gurevitch, 1995: 214). In short, the public sphere has become hyped up and dumbed down (e.g. Newman, 1999; Franklin, 1997). Other commentators view the spread of promotional activity more positively, as demonstrating a requirement that political sources communicate with clarity and concision to the public (Harrop, 1990; Kavanagh, 1995). Some also contend that concerns about the denudation of public discourse say more about elite fears of mass involvement in politics and culture than they do about contemporary trends (McNair, 1999; Street, 1996; Brants, 1998).

This article examines the public communication activities of 'quangos' (quasi-autonomous non-governmental organizations). The term was conceived as a joke in the 1960s, but has since gained international currency as a label for public bodies that are created by government to operate semi-independently under the guidance of political appointees. These non-elected organizations fulfil diverse public functions – for example, providing services, advising policy-makers, regulating other institutions, representing the interests of certain social and cultural groups, supporting private enterprise and promoting pro-social values and practices.
Consideration of quangos' public communication activities is pertinent to discussions about the spread of communications dependency for two reasons. The first relates to the expanded influence of these public bodies in many political systems. For example, quangos in Britain 'have replaced elected authorities as the natural home for the government and management of public purpose' (Skelcher, 1998: 1). According to one estimate, quangos control a collective budget of £60.4 billion: representing a third of all public expenditure and a 45 percent real-terms increase since 1979 (Weir and Hall, 1996). Another estimate projects that political appointees now outnumber elected politicians in British local government (Davis, 1996). The magnitude of these changes raises a range of democratic and constitutional questions. To whom are these bodies effectively accountable? Is their 'arm's length' status a smoke screen for enacting government policy beyond public and parliamentary redress? Do quangos provide a more efficient and rational means for organizing public business? Who gets appointed to these bodies and on what basis? Are these organizations at the root of a growing 'democratic deficit' in our political systems?

In our view, the implications of these concerns have been under-appreciated in mainstream political communication research to date, where attention remains so fixated with the conduct of electorally related politics, that little has been said about the erosion of the electorate's jurisdiction (Deacon and Monk, 2000). As Negrine perceptively remarks:

... little consideration is given to changes within the structures and processes of government which not only limit the effectiveness of the media but also raise important questions about the rationale for participation in the political system itself. (Negrine, 1996: 6)

The second reason why analysis of quangos' public communication activities is of broader relevance is because much contemporary debate about their role apparently contradicts the central tenets of the communications dependency argument. In the mid-1990s a broad alliance of politicians, pressure groups and journalists sparked intense political debate about the role of quangos, which centred on their insufficient public accountability and inherent secrecy. Because quangos' political authority is bestowed by the state rather than the public, it was claimed they lacked any incentive to care whether public or other non-governmental sources knew of them or held them in esteem. Furthermore, as there were few official requirements for quangos to be open
about their activities, it was taken that these opportunities for inscrutability and secrecy were widely exploited. Following this furore, a range of official measures was introduced to open up quangos’ activities to public appraisal. For example, in 1998 the new Labour government published a series of recommendations following a public consultation process initiated by its 1997 Green Paper ‘Opening up Quangos’ (Cabinet Office, 1998). These included that all officially recognized quangos should consult with the public more directly, produce annual reports and communicate their roles more effectively.

On face value, the very fact that such official guidelines are required to force these public bodies into the public spotlight might seem sufficient proof that this is one political arena where concerns about the positive or corrosive effects of ‘promotionalism’ do not apply. Quangos seem an exception to the communication dependency rule. But it would be premature to reach this conclusion solely on this basis, as there are strong prima facie grounds for suspecting that the indiscriminate characterization of all quangos as inherently introverted is an oversimplification. Although quangos are not publicly elected, many fulfil highly significant public roles — delivering key services, regulating institutions, promoting good practice, facilitating institutional and public partnerships, and so on.\(^1\) Given this engagement, it seems implausible that all quangos can be as oblivious of their wider political context as some suggest (e.g. Marr, 1995: 85). Furthermore, it is a mistake to assume that investment in publicity and secretive inclinations are necessarily antithetical. Indeed, in many cases, strategies of disclosure (publicity) are essential for protecting the private domains of an organization, either by assuaging, deceiving or redirecting external enquiries (Ericson et al., 1989). As Downing comments,

> Secrecy is not used as an impermeable shield blotting out all communication, but as a device to allow the pinnacle of the power structure to communicate how and when it prefers. (Downing, 1986: 114)

Recognition of this point shifts the focus away from a model of total disengagement towards one that is more attuned to analysing the terms of external engagement.

For these reasons, in this article we seek to test claims about the recalcitrance of quangos, rather than taking them on face value. For if these bodies are commonly inclined to display indifference, hesitancy or aversion in dealing with the media or engaging in public communication more generally, there should be ample evidence available.
However, before presenting the detail of our findings, it is necessary to explain more precisely how 'quangos' were defined for the purposes of the research.

Defining quasi-government

Moving from a general to a precise definition of 'quangos' in a British context leads into disagreement and controversy. The confusion is partly due to the imprecision of the term, partly because of the improvised nature of the British government, which has long confounded stable categorization, and crucially because 'quango counting' is such a contentious political matter. For example, a highly restricted definition of quasi-government (i.e. only officially 'recognized' public bodies, such as executive and advisory non-departmental bodies (NDPBs), boards of visitors and tribunals) suggests a steady annual reduction in appointive bodies in Britain since the early 1980s (Cabinet Office, 1999). This paints an expedient picture for those who seek to deny any significant expansion has occurred (e.g. Hunt, 1995).

Our research adopted an extensive definition of quasi-government, covering 'recognized' and 'non-recognized' agencies. Most non-recognized quangos are 'local public spending bodies' and NHS bodies, but we also included organizations that are mentioned in official lists of 'public bodies' and display some of the classic qualities of appointive government (e.g. an 'arm's length' relationship with central government and statutory powers with no direct electoral mandate). These additional agencies are: 'Next Step' Agencies, official regulators, nationalized industries and public corporations. Overseas or supranational agencies that might be categorized as 'quangos' were excluded.

A broad definition of appointive government was adopted for several reasons. We wanted to compare media relations between 'recognized' and 'non-recognized' sectors. As non-recognized agencies are at the root of the expansion of appointive government, it would have been remiss to ignore publicity activities in these emergent governmental forms. A preliminary analysis of selected media reports revealed that journalists apply the term 'quango' widely and unpredictably across all of the organizational types covered by this research. Finally, we are more convinced by the theoretical arguments for an extensive definition of quangos.

Research details

This analysis of quangos' publicity and media activities is based on two related empirical exercises. The first was a questionnaire-based random
Table 1: Formal publicity related activities/documents produced by quangos over the preceding year (in percentages)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>All sample</th>
<th>Next Step</th>
<th>Exe. NDPB</th>
<th>Advisory NDPB</th>
<th>Tribunals/Visitors</th>
<th>NHS bodies</th>
<th>Housing</th>
<th>HE/FE bodies</th>
<th>GM schools</th>
<th>TECs/LECs</th>
<th>Police</th>
<th>Other Local Spending Bodies</th>
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<td>100</td>
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<td>86</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>40</td>
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<td>72</td>
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<td>–</td>
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<td>70</td>
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<td>Conferences</td>
<td>59</td>
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<td>17</td>
<td>–</td>
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<td>Briefing papers</td>
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<td>68</td>
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* Career service pathfinders, tourist boards, regional arts boards.
sample survey of 272 UK quangos, conducted between May and July 1999. The survey achieved a 70 percent response rate from an initial random selection of 390 agencies. The second source of evidence is 61 interviews conducted with senior personnel responsible for the communication and publicity activities of a diverse range of these public bodies. Interviewee selection reflected (1) the diversity of quangos covered by the research and (2) differing levels of media exposure (high/low).

The extent of quangos' news management and publicity activities
68 percent organizations that responded to the survey had at least one member of staff with formally designated responsibilities for media and/or publicity activities. Thirty-two percent of organizations had 'information officers' and 33 percent had staff involved in 'publications' either in addition to, or instead of, media and publicity staff. Overall, 74 percent of agencies had staff with responsibilities in at least one of these capacities. The agencies least likely to have these staff were advisory NDPBs (13 percent), tribunals and boards of visitors (36 percent) and housing associations (47 percent).

In structural terms, most quangos did not demarcate media relations from other public relations and marketing activities and emphasized multi-skilling. However, there was little evidence such conflation was due to widespread underresourcing for media and publicity work. Fifty-six percent of respondents felt funding in this areas was 'fairly adequate', compared with 29 percent who said it was 'fairly inadequate', 9 percent who said it was 'completely adequate', and 4 percent that said 'completely inadequate' (1 percent were not able to judge). This picture of modest satisfaction was echoed in most opinions expressed in the interviews.

Table 1 lists in rank order the range of formal public communication activities undertaken by sampled organizations during the year preceding the survey. As a general observation, these results suggest higher levels of formal communication activity than has been indicated by previous studies. For example, 64 percent of advisory NDPBs claimed to produce annual reports and 18 percent to hold public meetings, compared with figures from the Democratic Audit in 1997 that found only 9 percent of these agencies produced annual reports and 6 percent held public meetings (cited in Weir and Beetham, 1999: 227).

These variations may partly reflect sampling and methodological differences, but raise the possibility that there has been a significant increase in quangos' communication activities during the late 1990s, as a
consequence of the furore surrounding their public accountability. Significantly, 67 percent of respondents said their publicity and media activities had increased over the previous three years, compared with only 4 percent who said this aspect had reduced. We return to this issue later.

The results in Table 1 also reveal sharp variations across the sector in the extent of public communication activities, with advisory NDPBs reporting consistently lower levels of publicity activity than executive bodies. Another notable finding is the high proportion of agencies that produced news releases, suggesting the media are a first resort for many quangos in publicity work. Most organizations distributed news releases routinely: 62 percent of organizations distributed at least one news release a month, and 42 percent at least one a week. However, the interviews revealed that the frequency of news release distribution is not a straightforward indicator of their importance as publicity mechanisms. Several senior press officers from organizations with high media profiles said they deliberately used news releases sparingly as a means of enhancing their effectiveness and took great care to target their distribution, evincing crude 'mass mail outs'.

Media contact

Although the tailoring of individual news release distribution was often highly context specific – i.e. dependent upon what was being publicized – most interviewees acknowledged that they generally prioritized specialist journals and correspondents, up-market newspapers at national level and local media. These targeting priorities closely mirrored the distribution of media coverage reported by organizations in the survey (see Figure 1).

Only 5 percent of agencies had received no media coverage over the previous year. Of these, 14 agencies were advisory NDPBs and three were tribunals or boards of visitors. These agency-types were also the ones that reported the lowest levels of contact with mainstream media.

Of organizations that had received coverage 49 percent indicated they 'generally' or 'always' initiated media interactions, compared with 14 percent that 'generally' or 'always' responded to approaches made by the media. (Thirty-five percent estimated that instances of initiation and response were broadly equal, and 2 percent were unable to judge.) Furthermore, this initiation of contact frequently extended beyond news release distribution. Forty-one percent of quangos said they had informal meetings and contacts with selected journalists. Of these, respondents
from executive NDPBs were most likely to report informal contact (70 percent), followed by higher education and further education institutions (61 percent), NHS bodies (60 percent), police authorities (60 percent) and TECs/LECs (local enterprise councils) (56 percent). With all other organizational types, no more than 20 percent of responding agencies indicated any informal media contact, with advisory NDPBs the least likely to report such contact (5 percent).

Most organizations were broadly satisfied with the coverage they received. Seventy-two percent that received coverage indicated that they felt it to be ‘fair’ or ‘very fair’, 17 percent were ‘neutral’ and 9 percent felt it ‘unfair’ or ‘very unfair’ (2 percent ‘didn’t know’). In general, complaints centred on the level of coverage rather than its nature: 57 percent said they received ‘too little’, 36 percent ‘just enough’ and 1 percent ‘too much’ (6 percent ‘didn’t know’). Notably, very few organizations said they had occasion to deny journalists’ access to information: fewer than a third said they had ever refused a journalist’s request, and most of these instances were to protect individual’s rights to privacy, commercial confidentiality or due legal process.

Most organizations seemed well placed to make informed judgements about the extent and accuracy of their coverage. Eighty-eight percent conducted some form of media monitoring — whether for appraising their own appearances or for general political surveillance —
although the interviews revealed wide variations in the sophistication of this work. Again, the agencies least likely to do so were advisory NDPBs, with fewer than half conducting any form of monitoring.

Beyond the media: intended audiences for public communication

The survey was also used to assess which general audiences quangos sought to address through their general publicity work. The most frequently cited target was 'the public' (87 percent) followed by 'customers/clients' (72 percent), 'staff/members' (63 percent), 'other professional sources' (56 percent), 'local government sources' (51 percent), 'business sector sources' (51 percent), 'parliamentary sources' (42 percent), 'voluntary sector sources' (41 percent) and 'central government sources' (37 percent).

These results prompt a range of questions. Why is it that specialist audiences are prioritized in news management terms, but lay audiences are most commonly cited as targets for general publicity? Does this mean the news management priorities identified simply reflect a pragmatic identification of the most receptive media arenas, rather than strategic preferences? More generally, does the general prominence of the public contradict the common accusation that in quasi-government 'down-line' accountability to the public always comes a poor second to 'up-line' accountability to government (e.g. Stewart et al., 1995)?

To some extent, the prominence of 'the public' in this instance is an artefact of the survey categorization. Whereas 'the public' is an imprecise and generic category, the other categories distinguish more precisely between particular political and professional arenas. Once all categories related to professional and political sources were aggregated, 82 percent of agencies cited at least one specialized political or professional arena as a key publicity target.

It is particularly questionable whether these results reveal the dominance of down-line accountability over up-line accountability. First, only 38 percent of organizations had conducted any form of public opinion or market research in the previous year (see Table 1), despite government recommendations that quangos should consider using these formal feedback mechanisms more extensively (Cabinet Office, 1998: 11). Such limited systematic citizen consultation contrasts greatly with trends among elected branches of government and political parties in the UK, where citizen polling and focus groups have gained considerable, some would say inordinate, significance in the formulation of policies and political objectives (Ward, 1999). Second, when interviewees were asked
to identify who they believed their agency was mainly accountable to, government and ministerial sources were the most frequently mentioned (34 percent of all sources referred to in interview). In contrast, references to ‘the public’ or ‘clients/customers’ amounted to 19 percent and 8 percent of cited sources, respectively. Third, these bald statistics alone do not capture the hierarchical nature of accountability described by most interviewees. When discussing accountability to government departments, many interviewees identified its contractual basis and the legal obligations thereby imposed. In contrast, public accountability was described in more abstract terms, often around imprecise and paternalistic notions of public service. In these instances ‘the public’ had a canonical presence, invoked as a broad and imprecise collective that interviewees felt responsible for, rather than beholden to:

There is a hierarchy of accountability. Essentially, formally we are responsible through the Board to the Secretary of State who is responsible to the department. So that is the primary level of accountability. In addition national industries are generally accountable to select committees of various forms and through the sponsoring department, the national audit office and to the public accounts committee. I don’t think it’s as simple as that. We then have an accountability to the customers, and to our employees and we felt we had a wider accountability to the community. (Interviewee, nationalized industry)

Fourth, it follows that the legal and contractual requirements of up-line accountability will necessitate the existence of more direct and formal procedures for communication and consultation, i.e. mechanisms for ‘talking with’ external sources, rather than ‘talking at’ them (PERC, 1996: 2). In this respect, public communication will have a less than central role, but, as we see later, this does not mean it is an irrelevance to government relations.

These points suggest that the issue is not simply which public, professional or political audiences are routinely privileged by quangos in their publicity work, but rather how public communication motives vary in relation to the audiences these agencies seek to address.

Public communication motives

When differentiating these motives it is necessary to distinguish between the use of publicity to facilitate scrutiny of organizations’ internal operations (internal accountability) and its role in aiding organizations’
engagement with their external political environment (external interventions). It did appear that the political furore surrounding accountability in appointive government had had some recent impact on baseline information provision (such as in the production of annual reports and the holding of public meetings). Representatives from most organizations were mindful of the broader debate around accountability, and displayed high levels of awareness in the sector of recent open government recommendations and proposals. But we found little evidence that motives related to internal accountability were central to the development of more concerted publicity work. Explanations focused instead on specific matters concerning organizations' external interventions:

Communications are influenced to a greater extent by the actual policies, the strategies we are trying to communicate. . . . Our role is changing, it is important that we should try and communicate that to people. (Interviewee, next step agency)

In noting this, it is also necessary to distinguish between external interventions designed to advance the profile and reputation of the agency itself (organization promotion) and those aimed at advancing general issues, practices or values related to an organization's work (role promotion). In specific publicity ventures these motives frequently intertwine, but in the interviewees' comments they were often sharply distinguished, with role promotion concerns being more commonly emphasized than organization promotion. In part, this seemed to link to the underlying ethos of arm's length government, i.e. that it should be characterized by selfless public service and political detachment. In this context, aggressive self-presentation was seen as an anathema. But this does not mean that considerations about organizational promotion were completely absent, rather that their salience varied depending upon which target audiences were being referred to.

Organizational promotion seemed least obtrusive in down-line communication to the public, whether through direct publicity campaigns or media contact. In general, the emphasis seemed to be on instructing rather than impressing public opinion:

The media are important to us as a public information route. People need to know about changes in regulations and things like that. (Interviewee, next step agency)

This didactic tendency was also evident in public communication activities aimed at more specialized political and professional audiences, but the more prestigious and influential the target concerned, the more organization promotion seemed to shade into the equation, particularly in
relation to media coverage. Significantly, several interviewees from national organizations mentioned government sources as key targets they sought to address (and impress) through a positive and prominent media presence:

We have to get over to [ministers] what we do. Because if they are going to have a single regulatory body, they might decide to lump [the agency] back with [another agency]... Obviously, at the end of the day it's the Secretary of State that decides, but what I'm trying to say to you is that if we don't get over our messages about what we do and how things have been improved under this system, then we might be disbanded or we might be pushed to one side. (Interviewee, public corporation)

In our view, these differences are explained by the specific political characteristics of quasi-governmental bodies. Quangos can afford to be more self-effacing in down-line communication because their political authority is not ultimately dependent upon public approval. However, appointed bodies need to be more mindful of their political patrons and other influential opinion leaders in their sphere of activity, as these exert far more direct influence over their political operations and prospects.

Recognizing the importance of, on the one hand, conventions of neutrality and, on the other, the realpolitik of appointive authority, also explains the privileging of local, specialist and (at national level) 'up-market' media noted earlier. In particular it demonstrates this is more than just a pragmatic identification of the most receptive media environments. Rather, these preferences reveal organizations' acute concerns about having their public interventions trivialized, distorted or sensationalized in media reporting, as this can damage their preferred image as authoritative and dispassionate arbiters in the public policy arena. Therefore, when seeking to communicate with general audiences, these organizations targeted popular media that were recognized as being least likely to distort or disdain their messages. In these respects, the local media were seen to score highly:

At a regional level papers are much more likely, and also radio and TV, are likely to report beneficial projects to the region. (Interviewee, national executive NDPB)

The specialist and prestige media sectors were also partly valued for these reasons, but had additional significance because they delivered access to influential political and professional sources whose opinions have greater resonance for many quasi-governmental bodies:

I want to target the people who read the quality papers... It's a way of getting towards MPs, which is obviously important. But in terms of
getting those two or three thousand opinion formers, obviously it's more important for me to be in the Times, or the Telegraph, or the FT, before anything else. (Interviewee, executive NDPB)

The importance of public communication

From the findings already presented it is evident that the caricature of all quangos as politically oblivious and pathologically introverted is an oversimplification. However, it would be a mistake to replace one generalization with another. While the survey suggested structural variations in promotional activities and provision across the sector, the interviews revealed more specific variations in the importance attributed to media and publicity, even among organizations that made substantial investments in these areas. A minority of these interviewees said that media and PR activities tended to be a 'bolt-on activity' in their organizations' operations, and that their involvement was mainly restricted to the end of any decision-making process. In these agencies, media and publicity personnel were often locked into conventional civil service style hierarchies that restricted their direct access to the most senior echelons of the organization.

However, in a greater number of instances, interviewees identified public communication considerations as having a core significance for their organizations' operations:

Communications is integral to the Commission rather than a bolt-on... It is not an afterthought. (Interviewee, executive NDPB)

In these cases, senior media and publicity officers described an earlier and more direct involvement in high level decision-making and unregulated access to the most senior figures at executive and board level. This high level access ensured senior publicity officers were informed about all aspects of their organization's operations, and enabled presentational considerations to feed into the formation of organizational policies and strategies from the outset:

My role is first to say, 'Well if it goes that way, that is how we are going to have to present it, that is what it is going to look like, that is the kind of reaction I think we are going to get.' And secondly to then, when we are getting near to the announcement, to say 'Right, well knowing the background, this is the way we are going to present it'. (Interviewee, non-ministerial government department)
Two factors appeared to create this differential emphasis on public communication matters. As quangos are hierarchical organizations, the disposition and background of senior internal figures have a critical influence on organizations' general media and publicity orientation. Several interviewees claimed a distinct culture change had occurred in their organization following the appointment of a new head with a more receptive attitude to the media and publicity issues.

But alongside these individual variations, there are evident structural differences across the sector. In a 1995 study, Weir and Hall concluded that advisory bodies are the most introverted of all quasigovernmental bodies, typically displaying a 'mildly hostile attitude towards the idea of opening up their work to public scrutiny and a disdain for the media' (Weir and Hall, 1995: 17). Five years on, this judgement seems to retain validity, as these organizations reported consistently less media contact and investment in public communication than other quangos.

This reticence seems to be rooted in several factors. Some advisory agencies only have a finite existence linked to a designated task, which means they will inevitably have less concern about winning and maintaining political legitimacy for their operations than executive agencies whose roles and responsibilities are open-ended and ongoing. Additionally, the often confidential nature of their consultations and deliberations can form a barrier against external communication during the earlier stages of their work.

Even where advisory bodies have a developing and ongoing remit, many only convene on an intermittent basis and if they do employ staff, do so on a part-time basis (Weir and Hall, 1995: 6–7). Such conditions are hardly conducive for the development of concerted public communication strategies. Added to this, many advisory agencies have narrow or highly technical remits, which will limit their appeal in media terms – particularly when contrasted with executive bodies whose routine decisions often have a wide and material impact upon public life.

Finally, the recalcitrance of advisory bodies may in part reflect that they 'are officially seen as outside the need for accountability because they merely advise' (PERC, 1996: 4). However, some see this as a dangerously complacent assumption, as it underestimates the significant influence this formative input can have on the public policy arena. For instance, in Weir and Beetham's comprehensive democratic audit of the British political system, the role of advisory bodies is identified as 'at least as important, and possibly more so, than that of executive quangos' (Weir and Beetham, 1999: 219).
<table>
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<tr>
<th>Involvement in the production of publicity material (internal and external sources)</th>
<th>Always</th>
<th>Quite often</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Never</th>
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<td>1</td>
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<td>41</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
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<td>17</td>
<td>72</td>
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<tr>
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<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other staff</td>
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<td>Local government</td>
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Control and autonomy

A recurrent accusation levelled against quangos is that they have little meaningful independence from government and that their vaunted 'arm's length' relationship is just a means for enacting government policy by stealth. Certainly, if the most conspiratorial versions of these claims are correct (e.g. Cook, 1995: Ch. 2) one would expect to find high levels of government intervention in quangos' publicity and media activity — particularly given the growing promotional sensibilities of the British state (Deacon and Golding, 1994), which have become even more attuned over the recent period (Franklin, 1999).

An interesting perspective on this matter is offered by Nicholas Jones, a senior political reporter with the BBC. No stranger to robust official news management, Jones remarks in the concluding chapter of his book *Soundbites and Spin Doctors*:

Civil servants have managed over the years to achieve a considerable degree of co-ordination in the flow of newsworthy material from the state. While their efforts have never satisfied their political masters, they currently face greater organisational challenges than in the past. . . . New sources of information have opened up through the increasing dispersal of public services to 'arm's length' agencies which often have their own procedures for dealing with the news media. (Jones, 1995: 222)

This offers a different viewpoint from the one commonly paraded in discussions about government patronage, as it claims that the proliferation of quangos has compromised rather than consolidated the capacity of the government to command the terms of public policy presentation. Contained within it is the proposition that arm’s length agencies enjoy considerable freedom of operation in publicity work.

To assess the legitimacy of this claim, survey respondents were asked to indicate the frequency with which various internal and external sources had a direct involvement in the production of publicity material by their agency and/or were given advance notice of publicity content (consultation) (see Table 2).

**Internal sources: ‘routine matters’ and ‘high level stuff’**

The results highlight the primary involvement of internal sources in the production of publicity material, with, predictably, inhouse media and publicity staff at the forefront. Senior figures also feature prominently, but the fact that their involvement is not as regular as designated media and publicity staff suggests some internal devolution of responsibilities.
To assess the boundaries of this freedom, the internal arrangements governing media relations were analysed in detail in the interviews. Some variation was evident across these organizations in the degree of autonomy media and publicity personnel were permitted. Some were required to clear everything through senior board or executive figures, but more were licensed to exercise their own judgement about the permission required for particular media interactions. In these cases, senior approval was only sought when issues touched upon broader policy matters connected with an agency's work, government policy and relations, or some issue of public controversy.

Serious, high level stuff has to go through the chairman. (Interviewee, nationalized industry)

Media and publicity personnel also described varying levels of control over other members of staff concerning media contact. In most organizations, the press office was the fulcrum of a high control culture, typified by a remark from a senior press officer from a national executive NDPB that

No one can speak to the media without the express permission of this office. It doesn't matter how senior they are, other than the chief executive.

But this centralization was not universal. Some organizations had more relaxed arrangements and condoned some contact between media and other staff without their prior involvement. At national level, this was most evident with organizations that had regional branches and staff, and where completely centralized control was deemed impracticable.

Strict protocols governing media contact were in part defensive mechanisms designed to prevent damage to the reputation of an agency through ill-judged or inadvertent comment. However, controls were also intended to facilitate media access, by routing journalistic enquiries to staff with the necessary authority and expertise to comment, and advising staff how to present information to the media in an effective way.

**External control: 'a policy of no surprises'**

The results in Table 2 also appear to demonstrate that external sources rarely have any direct input into the production of quangos' publicity material, and are infrequently given advance notice of any public announcement. In particular, the irregularity with which government sources are consulted suggests that whatever obligations quangos may feel in relation to up-line accountability, there is little sign of a clearance
mentality in their external communication work. However, these
statistics only reveal the regularity of governmental involvement, not the
conditions under which it can or does occur. In the interviews we sought
to clarify when quangos might refer publicity matters to government and
ministers, and how far they would brook intervention from these
sources.

Although most interviewees saw operational independence from
government in this area as a cornerstone of their political legitimacy,
most conceded they were mindful of government in their publicity affairs
and engaged in some consultation on sensitive topics. This sensitivity was
most acute among national agencies, because of their greater sphere of
operations, higher national profile and geographical proximity to
Whitehall. Not surprisingly, next step agencies revealed the closest
departmental links and the least discretion in their media and publicity
work, as they remain part of their sponsoring department.

The kind of up-line consultation most consistently described was
characterized by one interviewee as 'a policy of no surprises' — a process of
notifying government of their intentions rather than seeking permission
to proceed:

We have to have a careful balance. We are an independent committee ... 
and therefore we have to make it clear that we are independent but at the 
same time it is quite reasonable that we should let the sponsoring
department [know] ... of what we are doing. (Interviewee, advisory
NDPB)

Most agencies that had close links with government described them
as cooperative and non-conflictive, although a couple of interviewees
described persistently tense and fraught relations, relating to long-
standing 'turf wars' between their organizations and linked government
departments regarding the appropriate administrative and political
responsibilities of each. These broader political tensions often created
disputes over publicity matters.

These cases aside, the picture suggested by both the survey and
interviews corroborates Jones's remarks about the day-to-day operational
autonomy of most arm's length agencies in their communication
activities. But it does not follow that the government exerts no routine
influence over the communication activities of quangos. One obvious
mechanism is the regular, high level interactions between quango leaders
and senior government sources:
The way it works and the way it should work is that, our day-to-day contacts are at an executive level if you like through . . . the chief executive and the senior civil servants, and he would be informing them about our activities, media and otherwise, from one day to the next. So there is no need for there to be a lower level involvement between myself and the press office. (Interviewee, executive NDPB)

Given the hierarchical nature of quangos, it follows that if the leader is kept on-side, whether through negotiation, persuasion or coercion, then the agency will follow. Furthermore, there is the long-term, strategic influence government can exert through the definition of quangos' remits and its involvement in the appointment of senior personnel. Of course, the latter point is most significant for those quangos whose boards are entirely government appointed rather than those permitted a degree of self-governance in appointment procedures (Flinders, 1999: 19; Stoker, 1999: 43–4).

We highlight these factors not to deny the claims made by quango representatives about their room for independent action from government, but rather to emphasize that this freedom amounts to a 'licensed autonomy'. This phrase was first coined by Curran (1990) to describe the limited freedom of editors and journalists from direct intervention from proprietors, but it also neatly encapsulates the power relations that pertain between quangos and government.

Concluding remarks

This examination of the communication activities of quasi-governmental bodies and their media relations shows that claims about the insularity of these organizations have been overstated. Many quangos recognize media and publicity as integral to their operations and invest considerable resources in these areas. However, variation is evident across the sector, reflecting individual and structural factors: notably, the disposition of quango chiefs and differences in organizations' functions and funding. As a general trend, quangos with extensive, open-ended, executive remits have the most developed public communication strategies and media profiles, and organizations with narrow, finite and advisory functions, have the least.

Most quangos have some independence in organizing their public communication. However, this amounts to tactical autonomy, rather than
absolute freedom. Government influence, in particular, tends to be exerted strategically and in the long term, through the designation of quangos' roles and the appointment of senior personnel. Additionally, some agencies are permitted more discretion than others in their publicity work, reflecting the different structural relations between particular types of quangos and central government.

In the main, quangos' public communication strategies exist to facilitate (and promote) their political functions, not to encourage scrutiny of their internal workings. This is not necessarily for sinister reasons,\(^{15}\) neither is this strategic emphasis unique to these organizations. (Presenting a positive profile to the outside world while protecting access on private matters can be said to be defining features of all public relations work.) But it is important to appreciate that if the findings presented here challenge glib overgeneralizations about quangos' introversion, they do not assuage ongoing concerns about openness and public accountability in the sector.

More generally, the notable, if uneven, emphasis on public communication in the quasi-governmental sector may be symptomatic of a general spread of 'promotionalism' across political and institutional cultures, but it displays certain unique characteristics. There is far less evidence of the populist imperative that is affecting political communication in the electoral domain. Although many agencies recognized a paternalistic responsibility to communicate with the public, they seemed less concerned about courting public opinion. In contrast, concerns about impression management and self-promotion were more evident in up-line and (to some extent) 'sideways' communication. This pattern seems to reflect the particular nature and status of quasi-governmental organizations. As non-elected bodies, they are considerably (but not completely) insulated from the power of public opinion. However, as appointed bodies, quangos need to demonstrate their effectiveness to their patrons, at the same time as convincing other influential opinion-leaders of their operational independence and effectiveness. High levels of positive coverage in prestigious media sectors assist both these objectives.

The fact that most quangos can foster their media links far more selectively than elected bodies — whether with specialist or prestige media, that are less concerned about audience maximization and less inclined to sensationalism, or with local or popular entertainment media, that are not renowned for their critical abrasiveness — not only makes for far less conflictive media relations than are evident in the electoral sphere,
but alerts us to the fact that within a changing political environment, 'communications dependency' is a relative matter.

Notes

This research project was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (grant reference R000236953).

1. See for example, Prior's (1996: 95) observations on the 'reticulated local state' and the interactions between local public spending bodies, local authorities and a wider network of non-state agencies that are its basis. See also the observation made about local public spending bodies in the first report from the Committee on Standards in Public Life: 'Their actions may have a significant impact upon their local communities, going beyond those who are directly involved in the organisations themselves' (Nolan Report, 1995: 5).

2. The term 'non-departmental public body' is used to define agencies that are not formally part of government departments but are directly involved in either: advising government (‘advisory NDPBs’, e.g. the Spongiform Encephalopathy Advisory Committee); delivering public services and fulfilling other public functions and activities (‘executive NDPBs’, e.g. the Commission for Racial Equality, the Environment Agency, the Competition Commission); fulfilling quasi-judicial or monitoring roles (‘tribunals’ and ‘boards of visitors’, e.g. the Rent Assessment Panel for Scotland).

3. The label 'local public spending body' was coined by the Nolan Committee in 1995. It applies to the plethora of local and regional agencies that emerged and expanded their functions during the 1980s and early 1990s. Included under this label are: police authorities, training and enterprise councils (TECs), housing associations, career service companies, city technology colleges, grant maintained schools, further education corporations and higher education corporations.

4. Next step agencies are part of their originating government departments (unlike NDPBs) but have devolved responsibilities for the enactment and delivery of departmental policies and services. All next step agencies have their own chief executive and staff (although they are classified as civil servants) and are currently responsible for delivering three-quarters of central government services (Weir and Beetham, 1999: 195). Examples include: the Prison Service and the Benefits Agency.

5. These agencies variously regulate the recently privatized utilities (water [OFWAT], electricity [OFFER], telecommunications [OFTEL], etc.), and supervise the national lottery (OFLOT) and the primary and secondary education system (OFSTED). They are formally designated as government
departments in their own right, but have no minister in charge (hence their designation as 'non-ministerial government departments').

6. Few nationalized industries remain following the privatization campaigns of the late 1980s. Current examples include British Nuclear Fuels Ltd and the Civil Aviation Authority.

7. For example, the BBC and the Bank of England.

8. The sample frame was stratified by organizational type, but disproportionate sample quotas were taken to ensure a sufficient representation of national agencies. The survey excluded non-ministerial government departments (e.g. OFSTED, OFWAT, OFFER), public corporations and nationalized industries, as there are so few of these agencies (merely 0.5 percent of all agencies covered by the research) and we had flooded these categories during the interview stage of the research.

9. For example, our survey assessed whether a document was produced, whereas others measured their actual accessibility. Until recently, these have not always been coterminous (e.g. see Weir and Beehams [1999: 228] comments about the availability of annual reports).

10. This sort of distinction has occasionally been hinted at in the few commentaries on quasi-government that have addressed issues to do with publicity. See, for example, Peck's claims that the community consultations of TECs have been 'typically superficial and consultation has often assumed the form of self publicity' (Peck, 1993: 33)

11. Although only 28 percent of respondents overall had read the 1997 Green Paper 'Opening Up Quangos', this figure rose to 83 percent for those agencies directly affected by the proposals (i.e. NDPBs). Furthermore, 58 percent of NDPBs had contributed to the consultations process. There was far wider general awareness of the proposals for a Freedom of Information Bill (which will cover all these agencies). Sixty-one percent said they were aware of the White Paper, with national bodies showing higher levels of awareness than local bodies.

12. In quangos without appointed boards, the most significant figure was invariably the chief executive (or equivalent). In those with appointed boards, the key figure most commonly cited was the chairperson of the board, although several identified their chief executive instead. This probably reflects a broader variation noted in these sorts of quangos between those that are 'board driven' and those that are 'executive driven'.

13. This is not to suggest that a recondite sphere of activity always discourages public and media attention. In certain areas, the adjudications of key bodies are often closely monitored and seen as crucial and resonant interventions. See for example, the role of the Spongiform Encephalopathy Advisory Committee in the media furore surrounding BSE and CJD (Miller, 1998).

14. Having said this, several of these agencies either had or were seeking to appoint regional press and publicity officers to systematize local media relations.
15. As Ericson et al. (1989: 8) remark, 'privacy is a necessary condition for the possibility of an organisation arising in the first instance ... and for its continuation'.

References

Journalists and Quasi-government in the UK: conflict, co-operation or co-option?

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ABSTRACT It is frequently observed that political communication processes related to elections, political parties and the electorally accountable domains of executive authority have entered a period of great conflict. This article widens this debate, by examining journalists' relations with "quasi-government" bodies—i.e. the myriad of arm's-length public bodies (often referred to as "quangos"), that are appointed to office and that have colonised many official advisory, regulatory and executive functions. Presenting findings from semi-structured interviews with 40 UK-based specialist national and regional journalists, the article demonstrates how even these experienced journalists struggle to cope with the complex and evolving structure of quasi-government in the UK, and how their attitudes are often highly inconsistent. Although most are hostile towards the broad principle of appointive-government, their relations with specific public bodies that fall within this rubric are in the main highly co-operative, and these sources are often deemed authoritative and dispassionate arbiters in the public policy arena. The article concludes by discussing the political implications of the appreciably less conflictive relations evident in the reporting of appointive government.

KEY WORDS: Quangos, Journalism, Public Relations, Political Communication, News Sources

Introduction

It is commonly observed that relations between journalists and politicians in western political systems are now in a state of unprecedented competitive disequilibrium. Politicians and officials have to cope with an ever-more complex, intrusive and demanding media, while journalists are subjected to unparalleled levels of promotion and coercion by political sources. There is less agreement as to whether this situation is a good or bad thing. For many, political sources and the media are caught in a vicious circle, with the controlling instincts of the former feeding a corrosive cynicism in the latter, and vice versa (e.g. Barnett and Gaber, 2001; Blumler and Gurevitch, 1995; Franklin, 2004; Kerbel, 1999). Others are more sanguine about contemporary trends. Some argue that greater professionalism in presenting and marketing political messages demonstrates that political sources now have to communicate with greater clarity and concision, and in a more vernacular, and hence inclusive, manner (e.g. Street, 1996). Others claim that journalists' growing fascina-

tion with identifying the agenda-setting intent of political sources is not a destructive disdain, but rather a new and valuable form of political socialisation that helps citizens learn to deconstruct exaggerated claims and partial truths paraded in the public sphere (e.g. McNair, 2000; see also McNair, 2004, this issue).

My concern here is not with the validity of any of these positions, but with the premise that they share: that media and political system interactions are now, at root, defined by conflict. For example, Blumler and Gurevitch describe the "chronic state of partial war" that exists between journalists and politicians (1995, p. 203) and McNair acknowledges the "hyper-adversarialism" (2000, p. 85) that now flavours most aspects of their engagement. Although there seems substantial evidence to justify these assertions with regard to reporting of the electoral sphere (i.e. journalists' interactions with party political sources and/or the electorally accountable domains of executive authority), to date there has been no consideration as to whether they can be extrapolated on to all areas of media-polity interaction. There sometimes
seems to be a tacit presumption that conflict is endemic, but there has been no exploration as to whether this is actually the case.

This paper explores this question by examining UK journalists’ relations with “quangos” (quasi-autonomous non-governmental organizations). This unlived but enduring acronym was first coined as a joke by a British political scientist in the 1960s, but has since gained international currency as a label for the plethora of public bodies that are created by governments but expected to operate semi-independently under the guidance of political appointees. These arm’s-length bodies fulfill diverse functions—for example delivering services, advising policy makers, regulating other institutions, promoting pro-social values and practices, supporting private enterprise, and representing the interests of particular social and cultural groups.

There are two principal reasons why it is timely to consider closely media relations and appointive government. The first is that there has been an exponential increase in this form of governance over recent decades, and this trend is apparent in many other political systems as well as the UK. Quangos have proliferated across Europe (see Grieves et al., 1999) and there is a well-established patronage system in the United States, where more than 5000 senior executive positions are presidential appointments (The Guardian, 21 May 1997, p. 17). These include five of the seven positions on the Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve Bank and all of the nine justices on the Supreme Court. In the latter instance, it was these public figures that determined the final outcome of the disputed 2000 presidential election, which excited considerable controversy due to the fact that seven of the justices, who are appointed on a life-long basis, were the choices of previous Republican presidents.

This expanding importance of political appointees across many national contexts is due to the increasingly diverse and complex administrative demands of government as well as the emergence of a “new managerialist” ethos which has encouraged “the deconstruction of large public bureaucracies and their re-emergence as a multiplicity of smaller bodies in contractual and market-type relationships with each other” (Skelcher, 1998, p. 2). As Grayson and Davis (1996, p. 1) explain, “the administration of public services has been increasingly privatised in the interests of efficiency and effectiveness, and in the belief that private sector solutions to service delivery are intrinsically superior to those of the public sector”. In this context, politicians have been corralled into “the role of strategic policy makers” (Skelcher, 1998, p. 2).

Estimates of the scale of quasi-government in the UK are remarkable. As the Chair of Parliament’s Public Administration Committee recently remarked: “People talk about government as if it was elected and I tell you most of it is appointed” (Sunday Times, 22 September 2002, p. 13). Concerns first surfaced about the proliferation of appointed bodies in the late 1970s and then re-ignited in the mid-1990s after a series of studies demonstrated how appointed bodies were proliferating under the then-Conservative administration. According to one authoritative estimate published in 1996, there were 6424 executive and advisory quangos in the UK, controlling a budget of £60.4 billion (Weir and Hall, 1996). This represented a 45 per cent real-term increase since 1979 and a third of all public expenditure. By this period, local appointees comfortably exceeded locally elected politicians (Davis, 1996, p. 2).

When the Labour party was elected to government in 1997, ambitious promises were made about the reform and reduction of quasi-government. However, after six years in office, Labour has conspicuously failed to reduce the appointive state, even if it has made some significant changes in its structure (see Barker et al., 2000). An official review of quasi-government, completed in 2001, concluded:

[The regional dimension of the quango state is expanding fast and new responsibilities are already being piled on the new regional development agencies. But these developments are not bedded down in democratic arrangements ... We believe that it is the time for an urgent review of the principles and practices of appointed governance in the United Kingdom. There are major governance and accountability issues involved.]
This encroachment of appointed political power at the expense of elected political authority has led many to identify a growing "democratic deficit" in British politics, in which many areas of government are becoming less accountable to the public and its elected representatives in parliament. For example, according to Hirst, "Quangos are a means of farming out government functions based on distrust of the public, the belief that they are best left as passive consumers, and a belief that administrative accountability through management procedures is preferable to democratic control" (1995, p. 358). These concerns have been increased by allegations about governments' abuse of patronage in many areas: selecting appointees on the basis of their political docility, rather than their merit (Cook, 1995). Much has also been said about the secrecy of many quasi-governmental bodies, whose decision-making has often occurred behind closed doors. Disquiet remains in many quarters on this matter (e.g. Weir and Bootham, 1999, pp. 197, 211), despite recent government initiatives designed to facilitate greater public access to quangos (Cabinet Office/Office of Public Service, 1997) and to develop "practical arrangements" to increase the accountability of public agencies to parliament (e.g. Cabinet Office/Treasury, 1997; Cabinet Office, 1998). This highlights the second reason why consideration of media relations and the appointive state is urgently required. As Ralph Negrine remarks:

[The accountability of such bodies to the public is an issue that draws in the old "watchdog": the media ... Increasingly such specialist bodies ... take over important tasks, and governments could not function without their help. But the processes of delegation impact on those areas which can be open to citizen influences. As the lines of responsibility get blurred, broken or elongated, as the chains of command shift away from arenas of political responsibility, the realm of citizens' control via their political representatives and/or via the mass media as 'watchdog' shrink. (1996, p. 7)]

Unfortunately, the significance of these changes does not seem to have been fully accommodated in the mainstream political communication research agenda to date, which remains strongly orientated to the analysis of electoral processes and electorally mandated executive decision-making. Although questions about the conduct of electorate-orientated communication are of undeniable importance, more attention needs to be paid to how structural transformations in the polity have profoundly eroded the jurisdiction of the electorate and the implications this holds for the political role and orientation of the media.

Research Design

This article's discussion is based on evidence from 40 semi-structured interviews conducted with British national and local journalists between 1998 and 1999. The selection of journalists was guided by distributions uncovered in a systematic content analysis of 3450 quango-related news items published in national and local news media in 1997 (see Deacon and Monk, 2000). There were two vectors to the sampling. Firstly, sampling was weighted towards specialist rather than generalist correspondents (reflecting the finding that most quango news items were found to be authored by specialist correspondents). Given the myriad of specialist designations that exist, sampling concentrated on correspondents with the most prominent designations found in the content analysis. Secondly, specialist and generalist correspondents were sampled from across national and local press and broadcast media. With this vector, the total number of journalists for each media category approximated the relative distribution of quango coverage found across the media sampled in the content analysis (hence the inclusion of a greater number of journalists working for "up-market" news organisations).

Although these interviews were intended to provide qualitative insights into journalists' perceptions and practices, there were elements in the responses given that proved amenable to a degree of reliable, retrospective statistical summation. Where appropriate, these quantitative results are presented in this commentary to allow the reader to judge more precisely the
extent to which certain themes and issues were evident across the interview sample.

The discussion of the research findings divides into two sections. The first examines the journalists' general perceptions and understanding of quasi-government ("Quangos in Principle"). The second looks more closely at their specific appraisals of quangos, both in relation to their working relationship with these bodies and their perceptions of their particular authoritativeness ("Quangos in Practice").

Journalists and “Quangos in Principle”: “a combat zone of political discourse”

Although most of the journalists could readily recall the surge in media and public debate about quangos in Britain in the mid-1990s, none felt that the issue of appointive government per se retained any current news value. As one journalist perceptively remarked:

Pre May 1997 quangos were one of the sort of combat zones of political discourse, and they are rather less so now. That's not to say they've gone away of course. But the discourse has moved on and journalists are hungry people and in a sense a pack animal, and they've moved on en masse.

Most of the interviewees did not feel readily able to assess whether levels of appointive government in the UK were increasing, decreasing or remaining stable. Fifteen of the 31 interviewees who addressed this question said they felt the appointive state was expanding, two said they felt it was declining, five saw it as stable, four said they felt it was impossible to generalise and five did not feel able to comment. What was consistently evident was that most restricted their remarks to immediate or very recent developments (in particular those precipitated by the recent election of the Blair government). There was little comment about, or interest in, the longer-term structural transitions that have preoccupied policy analysts.

The journalists were then asked what they understood by the term "quango" and whether they would ever use it in their reporting. Only four journalists of the 38 who commented said they would willingly use the term, whether referring to general trends in governance or to label particular official bodies. Eight interviewees said they avoided the term because of its imprecision (a common criticism made in the policy literature) and eight felt it was also too technical or jargonistic for use in their reporting. In making these and other observations, 15 interviewees referred directly to the confusion it might cause their audience (compared with 14 who were either definitely or probably sure it would be understood by the public).

Many of the journalists also expressed concerns about the political associations invoked by the term. Although “quango” is the only label that has gained any significant public currency for describing appointed arm’s-length bodies (a point conceded by the new Labour government when it set up an official “quango” website in 1999), most of the journalists felt it automatically conjured up a range of negative associations. In all, 31 interviewees identified 50 specific negative connotations. The most frequently cited were associated with quangos’ unelected and unaccountable qualities (50 per cent of responses), followed by their supposed lack of meaningful independence from government and patronage abuses ("jobs for the boys") (36 per cent). Only five responses (10 per cent) related to their inefficiency or ineffectiveness. Because of these associations, many of the journalists felt that to use the term in their reporting would be to stray into the territory of unacceptable editorialising. As one BBC specialist correspondent remarked, "It's almost like comment if I use it".

It should be emphasised here that journalists were describing the general connotations they associate with the term quango, rather than their own personal political opinions about quasi-government. On only a couple of occasions did interviewees proceed to volunteer strong negative opinions about the role of quangos in general.

The interviews were also used to try to gain some measure of how the journalists defined the boundaries of the quasi-government. This is a complex issue as there is no absolute agreement as to where the parameters lie. Definitions tend to fall into three categories across the policy literature: restricted, extended and ex-
Table 1. Journalists' judgements as to which public bodies can be defined as "quasi-autonomous non-governmental organisations"

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of public body</th>
<th>Type of public body</th>
<th>Is it a &quot;quango&quot;? (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Arts Council</td>
<td>Executive NDPB</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent Television Committee</td>
<td>Executive NDPB</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health and Safety Executive</td>
<td>Executive NDPB</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monopolies and Mergers Commission</td>
<td>Executive NDPB</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spongiform Encephalopathy Advisory Committee</td>
<td>Advisory NDPB</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nolan/Neill Committee into Standards in Public Life</td>
<td>Advisory NDPB</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Protection Tribunal</td>
<td>Tribunal</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Industrial tribunals</td>
<td>Tribunal</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Training &amp; Enterprise Councils</td>
<td>Local public spending body</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tourist Boards</td>
<td>Local public spending body</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A grant-maintained school(^b)</td>
<td>Local public spending body</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A higher education body</td>
<td>Local public spending body</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NHS Trusts</td>
<td>National Health Service body</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health Education Authority</td>
<td>National Health Service body</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A health authority(^c)</td>
<td>National Health Service body</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child Support Agency</td>
<td>Next Step Agency</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highways Agency</td>
<td>Next Step Agency</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meat Hygiene Service</td>
<td>Next Step Agency</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prison Service</td>
<td>Next Step Agency</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charity Commission</td>
<td>Non-ministerial government</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Office of Fair Trade</td>
<td>Non-ministerial government</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Office for Standards in Education</td>
<td>Non-ministerial government</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bank of England</td>
<td>Public corporation</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BBC</td>
<td>Public corporation</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civil Aviation Authority</td>
<td>Nationalised industry</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>British Nuclear Fuels</td>
<td>Nationalised industry</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Percentages are based on responses from the 36 interviewees who completed this part of the interview.

\(^a\)The Monopolies and Mergers Commission has since been relabelled the Competition Commission.

\(^b\)Grant-maintained schools have since been abolished and replaced with foundation schools.

\(^c\)Health authorities were finally abolished in 2002: their responsibilities were taken over by primary care trusts and 28 new strategic health authorities.

NDPB, Non-Departmental Public Body.

To assess where the journalists drew the line, they were given a list of 26 specific public bodies that ranged from across all the organisational categories contained within the most expansive definition and asked to indicate which they would define as a quango (even if they would not use the term in their reporting) (see Table 1).

This exercise revealed considerable disagreement between the journalists about the defining qualities of a quango. Not only did they rarely consistently agree on applying the term to specific agencies, there was little structural consistency in its application. For example, 56 per cent of the interviews deemed the Child Support Agency as a quango (which as a Next Step Agency is only defined as such within the most expansive definitions), whereas the Prison Ser-
vice (also a Next Step Agency) was only defined as such by fewer than one in five respondents. At the other end of the scale, Tribunals, which fall within all existing definitions of quasi-government, were only defined in these terms by a small minority. It is impossible on the basis of these results to say that journalists incline to either a restricted, extensive or expansive definition of quasi-government.

From comments made during the completion of the task, it was clear that the interviewees struggled to reconcile two factors when completing the exercise. On the one hand, they recognised that the term "quango" had a descriptive function that indicated an organisation's structural relationship with government and the state. (Interestingly, many saw this in terms of an organisation's closeness to government rather than its distance--i.e. the focus was on the "quasi" part of the acronym, rather than the "autonomous" element.) On the other hand, the consistent and dispassionate application of this rule meant that they sometimes had to classify an organisation as a "quango" whose work and authoritativeness they respected. This sat so uncomfortably with some that they rejected its application in particular cases.

I am ticking "no" for the ones I think actually perform an important, useful role, whereas "quango", perhaps I should have got the definition of "quango", but my feeling is that a quango is something a bit unnecessary. (Home affairs correspondent, regional television)

It is not my intention to patronise the interviewees by describing the difficulties they encountered in completing this exercise. (The contested nature of the term "quango" alone guaranteed that the task would generate disagreement and confusion.) Nevertheless, some important points emerge from this and other remarks made about the principles of quasi-government. Whereas all interviewees could readily rehearse a range of negative arguments to describe the general role and prevalence of quangos in UK political life, there was little agreement as to which public bodies should be pulled into this frame of reference. Not all appointed agencies were automatically defined as "quangos", and many of the interviewees were willing to make honourable exceptions for appointive agencies who, in their judgement, had proved their credibility through meaningful and effective public action. This reveals a highly individuated view of quasi-government, where discussions of general principles seem abstracted, even divorced, from the analysis of specific practice.

Quangos "in Practice"

To consider this further we now consider more closely the working relationships between journalists and organisations that can be described as quangos (even if they are not defined in these terms by the journalists themselves). To stimulate this discussion, each interviewee was presented with a tailored list of 50 named quasi-governmental organisations and asked to select two agencies that they had had most regular contact with in their recent news-gathering work. They were then asked questions about their contacts with these bodies. The tailored lists varied in relation to each of the specialist designations included in the interview sample, and the organisations named on each prepared list were selected in relation to three criteria:

- All lists contained an even spread of agencies across the 10 organisational categories covered by the most expansive definition of quasi-government we had encountered.
- The selection of organisations in each category reflected their media prominence (i.e. the five most frequently reported organisations found for each category in the media content analysis were included).
- Media prominence was not assessed universally, but rather in terms of the particular agencies identified as being most frequently reported by each type of specialist correspondent selected for sampling.

This last point was essential, as our media analysis showed wide variation in the specific agencies foregrounded in different specialist news beats. Not surprisingly, correspondents tended to give greatest priority to quangos that have spheres of operation that are close or
concentric to their own specialist subject areas (e.g. home affairs correspondents and the Prison Service, health correspondents and health authorities, political correspondents and the Neill Committee on Standards in Public Life, environment correspondents and the Environment Agency, and so on). Seventy-five separate commentaries about 40 different quangos were collated from across the journalist sample.

**The Practicalities of Media Access**

The journalists mainly selected executive quangos to discuss—i.e. those involved materially in service delivery or regulation. Only two journalists selected an advisory body, both of whom were political correspondents, and who selected the same organisation (the Neill Committee on Standards in Public Life).

Local journalists had a greater propensity than national journalists to select entirely local or regionally based quangos, however a high proportion of local journalists also elected to comment on national bodies. (Fifty-six per cent of the agencies selected by local journalists were solely locally or regionally based, compared with only 9 per cent of those selected by national journalists.) The prominence of national organisations on the local news beat is not as surprising as it might appear, firstly, because local journalists were often referring solely to their contact with the regional branches and officials of a national body, rather than the national headquarters; secondly, because many national quangos deliberately target local and regional media in their publicity operations (see Deacon and Monk, 2001, p.32).

In most cases, journalists indicated they had regular contact with the quangos chosen. With 41 per cent of these agencies, journalists estimated their contact was at least weekly, and with a further 21 per cent contact was approximated as fortnightly. There was some variation in the extent to which interactions were mainly initiated by the quango or the journalist. In 47 per cent of cases, journalists said they more frequently made the initial contact, compared with 27 per cent where it was estimated the quangos generally took the lead. Although these results indicate higher levels of journalist initiative in instigating contact than was suggested by survey work with quangos themselves (see Deacon and Monk, 2001, p.32), the results are not necessarily incommensurate, as the data here relate to the most developed exchange relationships between journalists and quasi-governmental bodies. In these contexts, one would expect to see evidence of greater journalist initiative.

In two-thirds of cases, journalists said that their contact was either mainly or solely conducted via the organisations' press offices. For the remainder, direct access to known contacts within the selected agency was preferred because it could speed up the news-gathering process, compensate for an inefficient media service or provide greater critical insights into the internal politics of a specific agency:

> I don't regard their press office as very good, to be honest with you. So I tend to find other people that I know on a personal level in the organisation who are willing to help me out. (Education correspondent, national mid-market tabloid newspaper, referring to an Executive Non-Departmental Public Body (NDPB))

> It would be mistaken to infer from these remarks, however, that most of the journalists we interviewed had either an adversarial relationship with the quango press officers they discussed, were critical of their efficiency, or constantly sought to bypass them when seeking information from these bodies. Most assessed the performance of these intermediaries in a positive way, and several acknowledged that press officers facilitated rather than hindered them in their work. Only 12 of the 72 agencies commented upon were criticised significantly for the efficiency of their formal media-provision:

> I would rate [the press office] as excellent. The [organisation] is a very slick operation. (Environment correspondent, national broadsheet, referring to an Executive NDPB)

> The press officer is really their only press person, who also actually does a very good job because he is very receptive to enquiries ... I think we were better briefed than some members of the Cabinet.
Although the journalists' assessments of the quangos' media provision were mainly positive, most interviewees acknowledged there had been occasions where press officers had either refused to provide requested information or proved obstructive in other ways. In only six cases could a journalist not recollect any occasion when an organisation had obstructed a request for information, and with most of these cases this seemed mainly due to the irregularity of the journalists' contact with the organisation rather than any unique openness on the part of the quango. (With four of these six quangos journalists estimated their contact was less than monthly.)

This high level of refusal again seems to contradict the findings from the connected survey of quasi-governmental agencies, which found that less than a third of organisations had ever had grounds for refusing a request from a journalist (see Deacon and Monk, 2001, p. 33). In part, the differences may be explained by a degree of dissonance between information providers and information seekers as to what constitutes a rebuttal. Whereas quango sources tended to focus on occasions where explicit refusals were required, journalists were more sensitive to de facto denials, where torpid or incomplete responses by agencies served to hinder news-gathering:

**It is not that obvious, you know. They might not want to give you information you need and they might choose not to, or obfuscate the issue, say it is not available, or "we don't keep it in that form" or "we don't agree with that, the way you presented that, we don't have the information like that". And then there is [sic] other ways of confounding what you want, just saying that, "well whoever is complaining about this, that and the other is misreading the situation, misrepresentation, this is not our intention". You can do quite a lot of stonewalling if you want to try and prevent stories going in the paper. (Medical correspondent, referring to an Executive NDPB)**

What was particularly striking in the further responses given by many of the journalists on this matter was that this kind of obstructiveness was not seen as unique, nor a defining characteristic of these types of public agencies. Rather than being perceived as symptomatic of organisations with a closed institutional culture (a common charge levelled at quangos in general), such defensiveness was seen as "par for the PR course": an irritating but inevitable strategy for any organisation that seeks to manage its public profile and political reputation:

**I have to say that is not uncommon amongst some bodies, public and private. To some extent it is more common in private bodies. (Transport correspondent, national broadsheet newspaper, referring to a nationalised industry)**

Interviewees were also asked whether they thought the organisations they selected had become more or less media and publicity orientated over the recent period. With 43 per cent of the 66 organisations for which comments were provided, journalists said they detected some signs of increased investment in these areas, compared with 38 per cent where no change was discerned. Significantly, few journalists suggested organisations had increased investment in media and publicity to improve their public accountability. These changes were mainly seen to be about "gearing up" rather than "opening up"—a necessary professionalising of this aspect of their work to avoid being sidelined in an increasingly competitive political and communication environment.

**I think they have stepped up, they have improved their relationship with the press. As I understand it, the appointment of the press officer is a fairly recent thing. I can't from the early years remember them being so proactive. (General reporter, local newspaper, referring to a regional arts body)**

Many of the journalists' noted the crucial importance of the disposition of quango-leaders in determining the particular receptivity of an organisation to the media (again, this was a strong theme that emerged from the survey of quangos' public communication activities). Several interviewees spontaneously remarked that they felt an organisation had become more media-orientated following a change of personnel at the top.

**They used to be very insular and very, slightly, paranoid about the press and would keep very tight about it. Mainly because they are also an**
organisation that were under fire for a while about not being very active. But now they are more open because, as I say, they have got a new head ... you get this from time to time, a change at the top. (Environment correspondent, national broadsheet newspaper, referring to an Executive NDPB)

In many cases, the receptiveness of these senior figures to the media extended into a hands-on approach to certain aspects of media relations. Some journalists said they often had informal meetings and briefing sessions with these senior figures, and were permitted direct, “fast-track” access to them by phone should the need arise. In general this sort of contact was reserved for strategic, policy-related matters, such as informing journalists about impending initiatives, or in responding quickly to controversial matters arising connected with an organisation’s work. Routine operational matters were more regularly handled by press officers or other delegated sources.

This sort of high-level, intimate access was not provided to all journalists in their interactions with the public bodies they commented upon, nor indeed was it always sought. Its existence depended upon the motivation of both the journalist and the source organisation to develop a degree of regularity and intimacy in their relationship, which in turn relied upon three interacting factors: receptivity, relevance and reliability. Receptivity refers, on the one hand, to the willingness of a quango to develop close media relations—whether generally or in specific instances—and on the other, to the extent to which a journalist is likely to have a predisposed interest in the views and actions of a particular body. A central factor in determining the receptivity of journalist and source alike are their respective judgements about the relevance of the other to their own professional concerns. Just as many quangos have been found to deliberately target much of their news management at specialist correspondents seen as operating “in their area”, because these mediators can deliver access to the specialised political and professional audiences that the quangos often seek to communicate with, so many journalists acknowledged that particular quangos almost inevitably command their attention because of the proximity of the organisation’s sphere of operations to their own particular journalistic brief and the scale of the organisation’s official responsibilities therein.

If relevance motivates journalists and sources to cultivate close links in the first place, considerations about reliability are crucial to their maintenance and development. From the quangos’ perspective, informal access is normally reserved for journalists who are known quantities: i.e. those who have demonstrated their reliability and discretion in their reporting over time. Additionally, this sort of access remains a conditional privilege that can be suspended or removed for transgressions, such as deliberate misquotation and misrepresentation, or the open attribution of remarks that were intended to remain off the record. Interestingly, there was nothing in the journalists’ remarks to suggest that they found these expectations to be unusual, onerous or unreasonable. In general they were seen to represent a typical trade-off, part of the understandings that underwrite so many exchange relationships between journalists and their most prestigious contacts:

It is a build up of trust really, to them. They didn’t know what my attitude was going to be and that is fair enough, you know. And there have been some cases where they have been inaccurately reported in the past which hasn’t helped. So it is a case of building up confidence and trust really. (General correspondent, local newspaper, referring to a health authority)

Considerations about reliability also applied to the journalists’ assessments of the reputations and credibility of individual quangos, as understandings and agreements about attribution and confidentiality can only prosper where each party respects the importance and validity of the other’s roles, and has a degree of empathy for the pressures and expectations that circumscribe them. In commenting on the general orientation of journalists to social and political institutions, Blumler and Gurevitch remark that the more discreet a journalist is prepared to be in their dealings with an institution, the greater their estimations of its legitimacy will tend to be:

[Journalists] enter into “role relationships” with their prime news sources, building up a shared
"emergent culture" with them, including various mutually accepted ground rules and criteria of publicity appropriateness and fairness. It stands to reason that in such relationships, the more esteemed sources will be able to exert greater "clout". (1995, pp. 56-7)

It follows from this, that no journalist will take time to inveigle insider access to organisations they deem to lack political reliability.

Another facet to journalists' assessments of the reliability of quasi-government sources relates to the nature and integrity of information obtained via these means. Journalists do not enter into "understandings" with news sources about non-attribution and so on, unless there is some sort of return for their discretion. If informal, off the record briefings are consistently seen to provide unreliable information, or fail to provide insights that could not be readily gleaned from other sources, then journalists are unlikely to continue their co-operation.

An interesting example of the various issues that are raised by these close working relations was provided by one national journalist, who provided a copy of a recent written exchange with the head of a national regulatory body. The letters were prompted by a news report the specialist correspondent had written following a regular high-level briefing convened by the quango's press office for a select band of national journalists, which the head of the regulatory body chaired in person. The news article claimed that the quango leader had been "warned off" by a senior government minister from criticising key aspects of government policy. A few days after its publication, the head of the quango sent a letter to the journalist challenging this interpretation and alleging that he had breached the confidentiality of the initial briefing. He wrote:

You will remember that when I thought of establishing a regular series of meetings with those journalists who were apparently involved with and interested in the serious business of [the quango's sphere of operations], I said that it should be understood that these meetings should be off the record and under Chatham House rules...3

It was, therefore, with some sadness that I noted the content of what you had chosen to publish after our meeting on Monday. I do not know where you got the idea from that I had another

clash, as you describe it, with [the government minister], when I certainly gave no indication that had happened... But, more importantly I wonder if you could give me an explanation of why you thought it appropriate to breach the conditions under which we met, and publish what you did, because obviously I am upset that the arrangements that I thought I was establishing to help you do your job are endangered if we cannot stick to the conventions.

I am 100% keen to maintain close contact with the media, because of its [sic] ability to inform the public of major issues [in the quango's sphere of operations]. I have always tried to keep an "open door" policy, and to be as frank as I possibly can, because I do not like relationships which have to rely on the "no comment", or the refusal to answer when we are in the same line of business.

My responsibility is to inform the public [about the quango's work] and you are the means of doing that. Therefore, I would hate this arrangement to come to an end, but I am sure, were you in my shoes, you would appreciate my concern in this instance.

The journalist adopted a similarly robust tone in his letter of response. He refuted the charge of inaccurate reporting by quoting the detail of the regulator's comments from shorthand notes taken at the meeting, and by pointing out that his article was based on additional sources. He also disputed the regulator's understanding of the general conventions governing non-attribution:

I have checked my understanding of Chatham House rules with my colleagues, amongst them [his paper's Whitehall editor], who confirms my belief that they are generally accepted as being that a journalist may use the material from a briefing but without any direct attribution to the source concerned. I see little point in a journalist attending a briefing to be given information that can never be used...

From my point of view the mutual value of these meetings lies in your being able to flag up for us what the [quango] is up to on an embargoed basis so that we may know what to look for when it is finally published and for you to make your views known in a more relaxed way but so that they may be reflected in the public prints but not necessarily with direct attribution. I hope we can continue to meet on this basis.

The regulator's next response by letter adopted a more conciliatory tone, but retained an insistence that there were no tensions between the agency and the government, and that the journalist had effectively breached
confidentiality understandings by reporting comments that were intended "for background information only":

I hope that our exchange of letters has cleared the air because I am anxious to work as closely with you as I possibly can, and to make certain that you are able to understand the issues that I raise in my reports and the thinking and reasoning behind them. There are, as you know, huge issues around the development of the [regulator’s operations], and the problems that it faces. I know that many of these are misunderstood and I know that the media has [sic] a huge role and responsibility for explaining this. That is why I am so anxious to keep in close touch with those members of the media who have that role in their respected newspapers or other media outlets.

I am sorry if there has been any misunderstanding because that inevitably makes things more difficult. I was quite clear that any remarks I made were “off the record” and ... unless specifically agreed to the contrary, were never to be used and were for background information use only. Chatham House rules apply to attribution.

The journalist deigned to offer any further response, but within two months relations had been sufficiently repaired for the head of the quango to send a handwritten note to the journalist congratulating him for his coverage of a report issued by his organisation:

There are a number of wider issues related to [the report], to which I am most grateful to you for drawing attention, because it is those I have been trying to tackle, in addition to [the specific subject of the report]. Yours Ever [first name].

The detail of this dispute is interesting for what it reveals about:

- the formality and sophistication of some of the informal, high-level briefings arranged by quangos, and the pivotal role they can occupy in their public communication strategies (particularly at national level);
- the highly sensitive inside information trusted journalists can be made privy to “off the record” in these contexts;
- the complex conventions (and confusions) that can arise subsequently about what is non-attributable and what is unmentionable in coverage;
- the threats of exclusion that can follow perceived transgressions;
- the emollient responses that can also follow when briefings have worked in the way they were intended;
- that journalists are not powerless partners in the exchanges, and can themselves threaten to withdraw their co-operation if they feel they are being treated inappropriately. Having said this, they do not set the rules of engagement, even if they seek to negotiate their terms.
- that both parties retain an inclination towards conflict resolution, even when understandings have broken down, as it is in both their interests to maintain a cordial working relationship.

The Authoritativeness of Selected Agencies

We have already noted that journalists are only likely to develop close and co-operative relations with quangos that they accept as having a high degree of legitimacy (just as quangos are unlikely to try to cultivate close relations with journalists that are perceived as disinterested or disdainful). The question is, do these journalistic evaluations extend to quangos where contact is more infrequent and remote?

To assess this, journalists were asked to assess how authoritative they felt each of the quangos they selected to be and to explain the bases for these appraisals. In further analysis each assessment was graded on a four-point scale (1, very authoritative; 2, authoritative; 3, moderately authoritative; 4, not very authoritative) and in most cases (59 per cent of the 69 organisations for which assessments could be coded), organisations were classified as highly authoritative. Furthermore, there was no evident link between the regularity of contact reported and their judgements about its credibility. Correlating journalists’ assessments with the regularity of contact reported produced a weak correlation coefficient of $r_{ho} = 0.171$.

On this basis, it would seem fair to conclude that the principal factor that finally affects the regularity and intimacy of journalists’ dealings...
with specific quangos are the journalists’ assessments of an agencies’ relevance to their news-gathering rather than their appraisals of a quango’s reliability. This is not to say that issues about the credibility of an organisation have no importance, but that once a threshold is achieved the extent of their media profile is dependent on other factors—some of which are dependent on the efficiency of their own news management and some of which are to do with journalists’ own news-gathering initiatives.

Just as there was a high degree of consensus among journalists as to the authoritative nature of the quangos selected for comment, so there was widespread agreement that the fundamental basis of these assessments was the organisations’ official status. As Schlesinger remarks “Official sources may not always have to be believed, but they do have to be taken seriously” (1990, p. 81). This point was commonly echoed by the journalists in their remarks.

I would say [the quango is] highly authoritative because it is a government body specifically set up to promote arts in the area and I think their backing, or their support or anything suggests, obviously, an expert view I suppose. So I would see it as an authority. (General reporter working for a local newspaper, referring to a local arts organisation)

Certainly you would value the [quango] for its standing, because it is a body appointed to the prime minister so that is fairly high standing, and people have to take note of what they are going to say. (Political correspondent, national broadsheet newspaper, referring to an Advisory NDPB)

Official status was not, however, the sole factor that seemed to affect perceptions of a quango’s authoritative nature. These organisations also needed to convince journalists of their independence from their political patrons, whilst at the same time demonstrating that their decisions were taken seriously by these sources. It is in these two areas that the communication and impression management activities of the quangos themselves can have a critical impact on how they are perceived by the journalists:

They are often very critical...They appear to be giving a sort of, you know, fairly independent point of view...There’s always something in it that’s sort of you know criticising the way things are done at the moment. (Environment correspondent, national broadsheet, referring to an Executive NDPB)

The government uses their findings to kind of back up their policies. So that’s just another indication of sort of how well thought of their research is. (Health correspondent, referring to a National Health Service body)

They have got to show some independence. I think that’s already emerging and there’s some fairly strong characters involved. And they’ve got to prove to the public at large that it’s not just another tier of local government. (Business correspondent, local newspaper, referring to a Regional Development Agency)

Concluding Remarks

One of the underlying concerns of this article has been to consider whether the tensions and conflicts that have become so evident in relations between journalists and the elected domains of the polity are also apparent in the expanding realms of appointed government. The evidence presented here suggests a contradictory picture. When discussing quangos in abstract terms, journalists readily rehearsed a range of negative arguments about their existence and proliferation: to talk about quangos in general was to enter “a combat zone of political discourse” (to repeat a telling phrase from one of the interviewees). These perceptions fit readily within the conflictive frame evident in media relations with electoral sources. When journalists were pressed more closely, however, as to how they would define a quasi-governmental body and then questioned about their exchange relations with particular quangos, an appreciably more indulgent view became evident. Not all appointed agencies were defined as “quangos”—this is a political insult applied highly selectively for agencies deemed to lack integrity or value—and most of the commentaries made about specific bodies were respectful and broadly complementary in tone. Furthermore, hardly any of the specific agencies discussed by the journalists were deemed to be excessively insular or secretive, despite claims about the lack of accountability in the quasi-governmental sector generally.

It would seem, therefore, that media relations with appointive government do not yet appear to be sliding from the “control” to “chaos”
noted in the electoral sphere (McNair, 2003). Indeed, media relations in this sector seem strikingly reminiscent of the co-operative relations that pertained between journalists and politicians in earlier periods, where both parties were far more willing to limit and manage conflicts of interest when they occurred and there were even signs of an "emergent shared culture" between them (see Blumler and Gurevitch, 1995, pp. 34–44).

This may seem an excessive generalisation to draw on the basis of the evidence presented here, but it is an interpretation that is supported by related research work conducted in this area. Concurrent survey work and interviews with publicity personnel in quasi-governmental bodies found a majority believed their organisations received fair coverage and that their media relations were well ordered and cordial (Deacon and Monk, 2001). Furthermore, detailed analysis of media coverage of quangos revealed a clear disparity between the reporting of quangos in principle (where reporting was consistently hostile) and in practice (where quasi-governmental bodies were most commonly presented in a neutral and descriptive way, outside of the political fray).

Taken together, this evidence highlights the need for an alternative frame of reference when appraising media relations in the quasi-governmental sphere. Instead of debating the debilitating or rehabilitating effects of conflict, we need to think through the implications of the apparent consensus in this arena. When does co-operation enter the realms of co-option, even collusion? What should citizens make of the implicitly mixed message that appointive government is mainly suspect in principle, but often reliable in practice? Perhaps most significantly, what impact does the "arm's-length" treatment of "arm's length" bodies have in enhancing or obstructing the pursuit of greater public accountability in the sector? To what extent are journalists' practices and perceptions part of the solution or part of the problem?

Notes

1 This empirical work is a component of a larger research programme funded by the ESRC (grant reference: R000236653). My thanks to Wendy Monk for her assistance with interviewing the journalists for this article. An earlier version of this article was presented to the Mass Media and Communications Panel, European Sociological Association Conference, Murcia, Spain, September 2003.

2 The sample comprised: five education correspondents, five health/medical correspondents, five media/arts correspondents, five political correspondents, five environment correspondents, five home affairs correspondents, five economics/industrial correspondents and five general correspondents. Eleven interviewees worked for the national broadsheet press, six for the national popular tabloid press, nine for the local press, seven for the national television news and seven for local television news.

3 This represents a reversal of the order in which these matters were addressed in the interviews.

4 This was the definition favoured by successive Conservative governments throughout the 1980s and early 1990s and only recognised so-called Executive Non-Departmental Public Bodies (NDBPs; established by statute these organisations have their own staff, allocate their own budgets and conduct a range of administrative, regulatory and commercial functions on behalf of the state). Advisory NDBPs (these provide expert advice to ministers on topics of public interest), Tribunals (these have jurisdiction in specialised fields of law) and Boards of Visitors (prison service watchdogs) as quasi-governmental bodies (see Pilatky, 1998).

5 This classification gained favour from the mid-1990s (e.g. Weir and Hall, 1996), extending the definition of quangos to include the proliferation of local public spending bodies that have either been recently established or whose relations with government have altered due to new contractual arrangements (e.g. grant-maintained schools, housing associations, higher education and further education bodies, new health service arrangements). This expanded definition gained the tacit endorsement of the Labour government after its election in 1997, who started to include these sorts of organisations in their reviews of management and accountability procedures in the sector (see Cabinet Office, 2003).

6 Expansive definitions include all of the above but also extend the classification to include (1) older forms of public bodies that have become less prevalent due to wide-ranging privatisation programmes (e.g. public corporations and nationalised industries), and (2) new kinds of public bodies that have assumed very important roles in service regulation and provision (e.g. the Next Step Agencies that remain formally part of government departments but are expected to work semi-independently under the direction of a chief executive, and the various regulators that have been set up to supervise the privatised utilities and other elements of public life) (e.g. Fiddlers, 1999; Hogwood, 1995).

7 With 6 per cent of the organisations discussed contact was said to always depend on the journalist making the first move; 1 per cent said it always relied on the quango's initiative; 14 per cent said instances of initiation and response were broadly equal. The remainder of cases (4 per cent) said the situation varied so greatly it was impossible to ascertain a general pattern.

8 In addition, 8 per cent of the organisations were judged to have reduced their investment in media and publicity. In the remaining 11 per cent of cases, journalists said they felt unable to judge because of the limited time they had been employed in their current specialist position.
9 There is in fact one Chatham House Rule devised by members of the Royal Institute of International Affairs located at Chatham House: "When a meeting, or part thereof, is held under the Chatham House Rule, participants are free to use the information received, but neither the identity nor the affiliation of the speakers, nor that of any other participant may be revealed; nor may it be mentioned that the information was received at a meeting of the institute".

10 The placement of individual assessments on this scale was determined by careful analysis of the detail of journalists' answers. An evaluation of an organisation was assessed as "very high" when the journalist appraisals were unconditionally positive. Minor qualifications or conditions were coded as "high". Appraisals that were broadly positive but contained some significant reservations were coded as "moderate". Appraisals that were mainly or solely critical of the authoritativeness of an agency were coded as "low".

References


Holism, communion and conversion: integrating media consumption and production research

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In recent years a growing number of studies and commentaries have either advanced the case for a closer integration of debates about media consumption and production or demonstrated their commitment to this objective in research practice (for example, du Gay et al., 1997; Fenton et al., 1998; Gripsrud, 1995; Kellner, 1995; Lutz and Collins, 1993; Miller, 1994; Miller et al., 1998). This recognition of the value of a 'holistic' approach (Deacon et al., 1999) is not entirely new (for example, Halloran et al., 1970), but for all the prescience of several earlier authors, the establishment of a panoptic research orientation has long been stymied by a tendency to partition production and consumption research. In this article I want to consider the negative consequences of this tendency, to identify where productive points of contact already exist, and to suggest how it might be possible to develop a more conducive basis for strengthening links.

In advocating a holistic approach, I do not mean to suggest that the only research worth doing is that which assiduously combines production and consumption components (although more studies with this expansive purview are needed). There is no reason why different elements of 'the totality formed by the social relations of the communicative process as a whole' (Hall, 1993: 3) cannot be separated empirically — whether for positive reasons (for example, the accruing of expertise in particular areas) or out of practical necessity (the mundane realities of research funding). However, empirical divisibility should not become a pretext for theoretical isolationism, in which attendance to the complexities of one phase is used to justify disregard for the other. 'Holism' is essentially a mind-set, in which specialization should be seen as the basis for greater theoretical integration rather than a barrier to it.
This article is divided into three sections. The first identifies common themes evident in many theoretical debates concerning media production and consumption. The next section considers the consequences of isolationism, where effective integration is not achieved. The final section suggests a way of reconceptualizing a key issue that threatens to widen divisions between production and consumption perspectives: what should be deemed 'political' and by extension what should be understood to constitute 'political communication'.

Commonalities

Getting real

From the 1960s, when Eco posed the question: 'When I send a message, what do individuals in different environments actually receive?' (1980: 132), through the 1970s, when Hall identified the need to attend to the 'practice of interpretative work' by audiences (1993: 94), to the 1980s and beyond, when growing numbers of researchers started to examine the dynamics of media consumption directly, we can trace a progressive recognition of the highly problematic nature of 'reading off' audience readings solely through textual analysis. In a similar way, many production analysts have identified a 'problem of inference' (Cottle, 1993: 9) as diverse studies have exposed more unpredictability and uncertainty in production processes than are often imputed on the basis of textual analysis alone (for example, Cottle, 1993; Deacon et al., 1999; Ericson et al., 1987).

These equivalent acknowledgements that 'textuality is never enough' (Hall quoted in Morley, 1997: 123) are about more than just looking beyond the text for additional evidence. They also reveal a shared epistemological orientation: i.e. that it is both possible and desirable for cultural analysis 'to dissociate discourse from the prison house of language' (Chalaby, 1998: 63). While considerations about discourse and language remain important, these emphases are not permitted to transform into 'a kind of radical phenomenology where everything . . . is conceived as a social and linguistic construct' (Alasuutari, 1999: 3).

The kind of critical realism this involves is coming under some pressure due to broader intellectual currents, which include a 'literary turn' within anthropology, the pervasive influence of postmodernism, and a crisis of confidence in ethnographic methods (Morley, 1997). These, in turn, have encouraged a drift to constructivism in much cultural analysis, and a resurgence in textualism (Jensen and Pauly, 1997: 168). If nothing else, production and consumption analysts should appreciate their mutual opposition to the kind of fundamentalist discourse theory that refutes questions of socio-economic determinism and declares all but an arid formalism as
intellectually off limits. Aside from threatening to lose us ‘in the mists of relativism’ (Philo, 1990), these trends legitimize disregard for the social dynamics of textual production and consumption and remove any basis for understanding them as diachronic processes (phenomena in time). For if all the world is a text, there is no point in considering the material foundations and historical context of social and cultural activity – as all you get is more discourse, another skin on the textual onion.

STOP-START

Another common thread in debates about media consumption and production is a tension between what I choose to label as STOP and START perspectives. These are not mutually distinct categories, but polarities of opinion.

In its most melodramatic formulations, the STOP standpoint is infused with deep pessimism, whether about the individual or general social, cultural and political processes. History is seen as a process of decline or intractable dominance. Although the cultural critic is powerless to reverse these processes, it is her duty to expose this entropy and repression. STOP (So There’s Obviously a Problem). In contrast, the more idealized versions of the START perspective are suffused with a resolute optimism. At their core is a belief in people’s decency and rationality, and in the redemptive power of human creativity. History in this context is seen as unruly and ungovernable, and the analyst’s role is to acknowledge and celebrate these improbable victories and great escapes. START (So That’s All Right Then).

In a discussion of trends in globalization and localization, Sreberny (2000: 114) contrasts ‘the happy post modernist who sees that many kinds of cultural texts circulate internationally and that people adopt them playfully and readily integrate them in creative ways in their lives’ with ‘the melancholy political economist who sees the all pervasive reach of the multinationals and wonders how long distinctive cultures can outlast the onslaught of the western culture industries’. Although a knowing parody of position-taking, this characterization encapsulates a prevalent assumption in some media and cultural studies commentaries: that production-orientated perspectives incline to the STOP end of the continuum and consumption-orientated debates towards the START end. This is an oversimplification. For example, although some theorists within the so-called ‘active audience’ framework have celebrated the semiotic autonomy of audience members to make of texts what they will, they are not as numerous as some suppose. As Lewis (1999) notes, a close reading of many of the classic ‘reception’ studies reveals insights into the limits of audience resistance as well as its extent. Additionally, although work in this area has brought attention to the pleasures of consumption, it is not always valourized uncritically. Several
such studies demonstrate an appreciation of what Angus Wilson once described as 'the difficult truth that aesthetic satisfaction is not at one with ethical satisfaction' (cited in Theroux, 1985).

Similar diverse positioning along the STOP-START continuum can be identified in production research. Traditionally, the configuration of this debate has been cast as a stable stand-off between 'liberal optimists' and 'critical pessimists' (Curran, 1997), with the former emphasizing the dispersal of control and agency in cultural production, and the latter pointing to its concentrated structural determination. More recently there has been a convergence between these polarities, revealed in the emergence of what has been labelled a 'radical pluralist' perspective (Goldsmith's Media Group, 1999) that acknowledges the potential for creativity, agency and uncertainty within the production processes as well as its structural limitations. As Golding and Murdock remark:

It is essential to avoid the forms of structuralism that conceive of structures as building-like edifices - solid, permanent and immovable. Instead, we need to see them as dynamic formations that are constantly reproduced and altered through practical action. . . . Analysing the way that meaning is made and re-made through the concrete activities of producers and consumers is equally essential. (2000: 74)

But if respective debates about production and consumption reveal a diversity of positions on this STOP-START continuum, it is evident that the analyses most susceptible to the pitfalls of 'pat pessimism' or 'pointless populism' are those that deign to relate their readings of textual meaning to the social actions and interpretations of those cultural agents involved in their creation and consumption. For example, the bleak determinism of Herman and Chomsky's 'propaganda model' of news production (1988), which purports to demonstrate journalists' ineluctable enslavement to the special interests that dominate 'the National Security State', is solely sustained by (and sustainable through) its reliance on content analysis. In a similar way, but on the other side of the spectrum, some of John Fiske's more romanticized pronouncements about the subversive potential of popular culture depend entirely upon his singular textual readings, rather than any systematic appraisal of viewers' derivations or evaluations.¹

Contingent conditions

The main reason why most production and consumption analysts tend to avoid either extreme of the STOP-START continuum, is because research in both areas has cumulatively exposed the complexity, heterogeneity and context dependency of these respective processes. For example, in a classic study of television documentary production, Elliott developed a theoretical
framework for linking different types of media output with the 'production
scope' available to media professionals in relation to external power
sources in each instance (1972). More recently, it has been noted that:

Each community of cultural workers represents a unique and complex case in
which inventiveness on the one hand and institutional constraint on the other
give rise to many varied outcomes. . . . In the light of increasing evidence that
all culture grows out of concrete social situations, one might plausibly argue
that while large sections of the capitalist cultural economy will always produce
dross of one sort or another, there is no reason in principle why other segments
cannot function at the leading edges of cultural progress and experimentation.
(Scott, 1999: 809, 814)

A negative illustration of this observation is offered by a recent study of
the production of 'mega-musicals' (Burston, 1999), which demonstrated
that this part of the popular music industry provides far less space for
creative personnel involved in the production processes than has been
identified in other areas.2

Of course, audience researchers from diverse traditions have long been
concerned with identifying the contingent conditions of media inter­
pretation, use and influence. Whereas conventional effects research has
tended to focus on the individual and social-psychological factors, new
forms of qualitative audience research have shifted attention to the 'socially
contingent nature of much mediated activity' (Lindlof, 1988: 81) and how
mass audiences actually comprise a myriad of loosely configured and fluid
'interpretive communities' who bring different experiences, competences,
solidarities, motivations and practices to their media consumption.

Perhaps one of the greatest challenges facing both production and
consumption research is the development of a framework that permits the
introduction of 'a sense of chronology into analyses of reception and
production in which the dynamics of understanding and interpretation are
recognized as historically located processes rather than as synchronous
events' (Fenton et al., 1998: 161). My feeling is that this project is more
advanced in production research, where several commentators have ex­
plicitly identified the need to understand production processes in diachronic
terms (for example, Blumler and Gurevitch, 1996; Cottle, 2000; Curran,
1997: 91; Deacon and Golding, 1994: 188; Fenton et al., 1998; Garnham,
1997: 61; Manning 2001: 49). By comparison, although questions of
temporality are often addressed in studies of media consumption, such as in
charting how media use interleaves with the routines of daily life, this
rarely extends to a specific historicity. One notable exception is Gripsrud's
study of 'the Dynasty Years' (1995), which relates its analysis of audience
interpretations and public discourse about the soap opera to a specific period in late 1980s Norwegian (and Western) society. Significantly, this
piece of reception research incorporated both an extensive production
component and acknowledged 'the powerful role of production in the processes of media communication' (1995: 18).

De-centring the media

A further shared theme in recent debates on media production and consumption concerns the appropriate degree of emphasis that should be placed on the media within each analytical framework. In production and consumption research there have been similar calls to 'de-centre' the media from the research focus and to locate their analysis within a broader nexus of social structures and activities.

This trend is more advanced within media consumption research, where in the mid-1980s a second wave of interpretative audience research emerged, drawing on an 'ethnographic turn' in research activity (Gray, 1992; Lull, 1990; Morley, 1986; Silverstone and Hirsch, 1992). These studies redirected attention away from issues of audience interpretations towards the analysis of the social functions and uses of media, thereby adding a 'horizontal'/ritual perspective to understanding of the media's role that complements more traditional concerns about the 'vertical dimensions' of media power (Morley, 1998). In doing so, they demonstrated that 'the social worlds of the audience encompass far more than their continuing efforts, as a dominated class or situated subjects, to decode the messages sent them by the mass media' (Jensen and Pauly, 1998).

Some have reservations about this de-centring of the media in audience research (see later), but its rationale chimes with current debates in some areas of production research. For example, until recently the communication strategies and objectives of the institutions and individuals accessed by media professionals as 'authorized-knowers' (Ericson et al., 1989) were subject to little direct empirical scrutiny. What insights existed, were either inferred from the perspective of journalists (Gans, 1979; Sigal, 1973) or from the analysis of media content. Following the lead of researchers like Gandy (1982), Ericson et al. (1989) and Schlesinger (1990), there is now a burgeoning literature on the sociology of media sources, which demonstrates that a complete understanding of the complexities of media agenda-building can only be achieved by breaking with the implicitly media-centric purview of empirical studies that restrict their analysis to media professionals (for example, Manning, 2001; Miller, 1994; Schlesinger and Tumber, 1994).

It could be argued that this particular expansion of the analytical frame is not exactly equivalent to developments in audience research mentioned above because, despite the de-centring of the media, these production debates still remain concerned with issues of interpretation and the vertical dimensions of media power (i.e. who shapes media agendas?). More recently, however, an additional approach has emerged that bears even
closer resemblance to the horizontalization of the research agenda evident in second-wave audience ethnographies. From this perspective it has been claimed that even news-source research retains an implicit media-centrism, by failing to appreciate how powerful institutions and individuals seek to exert influence and construct political discourse in arenas other than the media. For instance, in an analysis of the framing of public debate about the BSE crisis, Miller argues:

[T]o the extent that such work is about definitional struggles in society it runs the risk of being media-centric in a different sense. Definitions of social problems (or of scientific issues) are not only made in the mass media. . . . The logic of examining the genesis of definitions in the media implies the direct investigation of definitions in other areas. (1999: 1240)

The costs of dissociation

These then are at least some common themes evident in contemporary debates about media production and consumption. However, their existence owes more to chance than design, and there are no guarantees that these links will continue to strengthen. As is discussed in the final section of this article, substantial fault lines remain that threaten the further development of holistic perspectives. But before considering these, I want to outline what I see as the main detrimental consequences of any continued dissociation between consumption and production debates.

First, dissociation fosters a tendency among researchers to underestimate, and even deny, the complexities of social and cultural processes beyond their immediate purview. Although these assumptions may conveniently allow analysts to fetishize their own interests, the underlying proposition that meaningful articulation occurs in certain areas of the communication totality and not others is clearly untenable in light of the kinds of evidence outlined in the previous section.

Second, isolationism can create a centrifugal effect in which media de-centring (which provides valuable perspective and is not incompatible with 'vertical' questions about media power [Morley, 1997]) transforms into media denial. Schröder comments that the development of an audience research framework fixated with 'horizontal' questions about the social contexts of cultural consumption threatens 'to write the media, as a focus of research, out of existence' (quoted in Alasuutari, 1999: 7). One major corollary of this is that it diverts attention from the media's key significance as 'message bearing technology' (Miller, 1994: 270). In my view, similar concerns can be raised in relation to the broadening of production-related debates. For if the media are perceived as just one of many arenas in which political and public discourses are formulated and contested, there is a risk of returning to the residual position of traditional
policy analyses in which media systems are seen as subordinate to political systems, and a peripheral part of the ‘environment’ in which policy choices are formulated and implemented (Deacon and Golding, 1994: 8). Such a position underestimates the extent to which the tendrils of ‘media logic’ (Altheide and Snow, 1979) have come to pervade political and institutional culture over recent decades, and how politics has now become dependent ‘in its central functions on mass media’ (Mazzolena and Schulz, 1999: 250).

Implicit to my concerns here is the need for communication and media analysts to retain some emphasis on mediation and meaning. Furthermore, the fact that many consumption and production studies have exposed problems of inference associated with stand-alone textualism, does not deny a role for textual analysis nor the need to consider how the discursive operation and rhetorical form of media texts affect different elements of the communication process (NB this issue is as pertinent to debates about encoding as it is to decoding [see Cottle, 2000]).

The third detrimental cost of dissociating consumption and production debates is that many key issues within media and cultural theory cannot be dealt with satisfactorily through a monocular approach. For example, the current controversy about the ‘dumbing down’ and ‘tabloidization’ of news and current affairs reveals a range of views along the STOP–START continuum, with some lamenting the debasement of media and public discourses and others welcoming the overthrow of outmoded elitist and paternalistic journalistic practices. What is striking about this debate is how the focus to date has been limited to production and textual analysis. This continuing failure to integrate consumption into the equation leaves the tabloidization debate stranded in mid-air: able to argue the causes and characteristics of the processes, but poorly positioned to ascertain their wider social consequences.

Elsewhere, recognition of the complexity and heterogeneity of audience readings and interpretations has led some to question the value, even possibility, of conceiving texts as having ‘preferred readings’ that may be accepted, negotiated, ignored, opposed or confused by their readers. In outlining a truly innovative model for analysing audience responses, Schroeder argues that the search for a ‘master interpretation’ of the text:

... is bound to fail, for the simple reason that any decoding, even that of a skilled textual analyst, is always already another encoding, that is, a product of the decoder’s cultural and communicative repertoires, and therefore marginally or substantially different from other readings. (2000: 9)

In my view, this is unduly pessimistic; by analysing authorial actions and production dynamics directly, rather than imputing them solely through textual deconstruction, we are reasonably well positioned to identify how and where texts become inscribed with privileged meanings. (Certainly, the
growing legions of issue entrepreneurs, impression managers, spin doctors, product placers and other publicists have few qualms about thinking in these terms.) Furthermore, abandoning attention to preferred reading threatens to cleave issues of interpretation from influence. This would be highly regrettable for, as Corner notes, influence remains ‘an indispensable point of reference. . . . Once we stop asking questions about it . . . a great deal of purpose disappears from whatever other questions we choose to ask about the media, especially those about interpretation’ (2000: 394–5).

For all these reasons, remaining in, or retreating into, isolationism can only hinder theoretical progression in the field. However, it would be a mistake to assume that the path is now completely clear for the full integration of production and consumption debates. Some significant obstructions remain and one of these concerns disagreement about how we should appropriately conceptualize the political realm and on this basis decide ‘what counts as political communication’. In the final section of this article, I explain why this issue has tended to polarize consumption- and production-orientated perspectives and present a heuristic model that seeks to resolve the conflict by encouraging greater precision in the ways in which we think of ‘politics’ and ‘communication’, both separately and in conjunction.

What counts as political communication?

Classical definitions of political communication commonly display several related features. Political communication is seen as purposive communication (for example, Hennessey, 1968: 18). For all that political communicators seek to ingratiate themselves with their audience, this orientation is ultimately defined by, and dependent upon, an underlying political project. Classical definitions also assume a ‘bounded’ definition of the political realm (Blumler and Gurevitch, 2000: 164). Political communication relates to the conduct of public affairs, and debates in this framework mainly focus on rationalistic concerns about information flows, management, processing and effects. In media terms, this means that political communication is primarily analysed in the domains of news and current affairs. On the occasions other genres and the politics of entertainment more generally are considered, their significance tends to be construed narrowly and instrumentally. Finally, the main focus of inquiry falls upon short-term processes and ‘immediate outcomes . . . [as] Political communicators seek practical and immediate results’ (Denton and Woodwards, 1990: 9).

More recently, the explosion of interest in identity politics, ideology, popular culture and the ‘politics of the personal’ has produced a markedly different model of political communication. Within this more expansive framework, public affairs are no longer deemed the sum or the summit of
politics. Developing the feminist maxim that 'the personal is political too', politics is perceived as an 'infinite' realm (Blumler and Gurevitch, 2000). This has prompted 'a growing recognition of the considerable political significance of a much wider realm of cultural products . . . and a consequent concern with the ideological structure of “entertainment” media, popular fiction and music' (Morley, 1990: 129). Furthermore, the construction of political meaning is seen as far more complex than is suggested by traditional transmission models. Attention has shifted from the manifest dimensions of political communication to its latent ritualistic functions and symbolic qualities. Accordingly, attention to affective dimensions has increased and rationalist concerns have reduced. Finally, there has been a progressive elevation of interest in the role of message recipients, in some cases to a point where interest in consumer derivations supersedes questions about producers' intentions.

These contrasting definitions of political communication are not completely isolated from each other. There are many examples where attempts have been made to extend the range of conventional definitions to accommodate some of the considerations foregrounded in the expansive definition (for example, Denton and Woodwards, 1990; Nimmo and Swanson, 1990). Equally significant is a contra-movement, in which a diverse range of theorists working outside the political science mainstream have come to argue for a more limited definition of the political realm and the role of communication therein, often invoking concerns about citizenship. Their common ground for doing so is a concern that the indiscriminate embrace of the politics of popular culture, consumption and personal pleasure – which some claim have become the defining considerations of contemporary cultural studies – has diverted attention from important questions about power and inequality in contemporary society. For example, Gitlin asserts 'it is pure sloppiness to conclude that culture is politics. Culture is mistaken for politics only by default' (1991: 336). In a similar vein, Philo and Miller (1997) attack many cultural studies theorists for their failure to ground their analyses within an adequate appreciation of deepening socio-economic divisions. In their view this 'cultural compliance', which celebrates rather than critiques capitalist culture, is a reprehensible dereliction of intellectual and political duty. Nor are these criticisms restricted to those outside cultural studies. A decade ago Corner (1991) lamented the 'sociological quietism' and 'loss of critical energy' in this field, and argued for the need to separate the analysis of popular culture from 'the public knowledge project'. At the same time, Barker and Beezer regretted the abandonment of public affairs and 'the disappearance of power as a central concept within cultural studies' (1991: 18).

At first sight these views may appeal to those whose interests have never strayed far from the conduct of public affairs in the first place. Certainly, there is weight to the argument that one consequence of infinitely
expanding what is understood to be ‘political’ is that the term loses any analytical precision. However, I am not convinced that restricting understanding of ‘what counts as political communication’ in these ways is either as feasible or desirable as it might appear. First, I am uneasy about the ‘moral hierarchy’ (Gray, 1998) evident in these critiques, in which ‘macro’, public, rationalistic matters are seen as priorities and ‘micro’, personal, affective concerns as inconsequential. Surely too much is lost by returning to a position that may concede there are political qualities in pleasure and popular culture, but chooses to deny their political significance (for example, Gitlin, 1991: 41). Second, one can only assume it is easy to separate the ‘macro’ wheat from the ‘micro’ chaff, by invoking the kind of structuralist account of power relations that so much recent work in production and consumption analysis has thrown into question. Third, it is not a propitious time to be erecting theoretical firewalls between politics and popular culture. The main reason why many mainstream political scientists have become interested in embracing more expansive definitions of political communication is because they recognize that the nature of formal politics has changed. Blumler and Gurevitch describe the growth of ‘porous politics’, in which: ‘What counts as “political” has become less clear cut than previously. Highly significant in this respect has been the entry of popular culture into politics’ (2000: 163). Along similar lines, Axford identifies:

… the deconstruction of the institutional and ideological foundations of mass politics and the rise of a more fragmented ‘modular’ politics based on communal sentiments as well as less grounded identities. A crucial element in these seminal changes is the extent to which cultural factors and aesthetics have gained a growing power and interest. (2001: 2)

Finally, the intemperate nature of this debate (these interventions have in turn elicited sharp ripostes) and the perceived configuration of its protagonists (with political economy on one side and cultural studies on the other) threatens to entrench divisions and obstruct the development of holistic perspectives. Particularly damaging is the shared assumption that this is a zero-sum debate, i.e. that it is not simply a case of arguing that a particular type and domain of politics ‘matters’, but rather that it ‘matters more’. In this respect, there is evident guilt on both sides, with many cultural studies theorists being as dismissive of public affairs as some of their opponents have been of popular culture (for example, Hartley, 1996).

Communion and conversion: developing a basis for integration

For all these reasons, there is a need to find a way around the impasse. This can only happen by developing a framework that can integrate
concerns about popular culture and public knowledge, but in ways that permit conceptual distinctions without resorting to moral hierarchies. In the remainder of this article I want to outline a heuristic model that may help advance these objectives.

The basic premise of this model is the need to introduce more precision in terminology, for while some assume the term ‘political communication’ offers a way of restricting the range of inquiry, the phrase is actually hopelessly inclusive. Aside from the widely documented difficulties in determining where ‘politics’ ends, there is an equivalent problem in deciding what is (and what is not) ‘communication’. Carey has suggested that ‘communication’ and ‘culture’ are virtually interchangeable terms (1992), but this offers little clarification as culture has become one of the great catch-all labels of the contemporary era (Garnham, 2000). Elsewhere, it has been argued that one of the founding axioms of communication is that ‘one cannot not communicate’ (Watzlawick et al., 1968), and that even nonsense, silence, withdrawal and immobility represent forms of communication (see also Jaworski, 1993). Collectively, these points expose ‘political communication’ as a virtual tautology, describing an ‘infinite infinity’.

I suggest dividing ‘communication’ into two sub-categories: ‘conversion’ and ‘communion’. Both terms are religious in origin, the former relating to the spreading of religious beliefs and the winning of converts, the latter to the sharing of ceremonies and sacraments of the converted. Applied in a secular sense, conversion obviously relates to the bounded definitions of political communication previously mentioned and ‘vertical’ questions about media power. Correspondingly, communion resonates with infinite definitions and ‘horizontal’ analyses of the integration of media into the rituals, routines and timbres of daily life. Also implicit within the distinction is a contrasting conceptualization of the relationship between message producers and consumers. With conversion the emphasis falls on their disequilibrium, whereas with ‘communion’ they are assumed to exist in a state of equilibrium (however tenuous).

Conversion and communion also prompt comparison with existing theoretical categorizations deployed within communication and cultural theory. The most obvious is Carey’s distinction between transmission models of communication (‘the transmission of signals or messages for the purposes of control’ [1975]) and ritual models (‘Communication is linked to such terms as sharing, participation, association and the possession of a common faith’ [1975]). Another is Fairclough’s (1991) distinction between the ‘ideation’ function of communication (the promulgation of knowledge, values and norms) and ‘interpersonal’ functions (identity formation and social relations). Also relevant is a long-neglected distinction contained within Habermas’s original theorization of the public sphere, which
distinguishes the rational public sphere and the literary public sphere (Murdock, 2001)

If the communion/conversion distinction owes a debt to earlier theories, I believe there is some innovation in the way it is applied here. Instead of using it to describe paradigm shifts in communication theory (à la Carey) or to contrast distinct domains of public discourse and communality (à la Habermas) I suggest it should be used more precisely to categorize and compare specific communication instances. The model I develop below has three founding propositions:

- that aspects of political communion and political conversion are evident in most communicative instances;
- that in many instances it is appropriate to conceive of one of these aspects as being ascendant;
- that in some instances communion and conversion can be equally prominent.

Following on from these propositions, it is clear that the relationship between political communion and political communication cannot be conceptualized either as a neat dichotomy or as a continuum. For all three propositions to be accommodated, communion and conversion need to be conceived of as existing in a perpendicular rather than linear relationship (see Figure 1) - i.e. when categorizing specific communicative instances calculations need to be made with respect to both criteria. This raises a further question of how one categorizes communication instances in these terms.

Assessing communion and conversion

Following the logic of my earlier remarks, the main test of whether a communicative instance should be deemed ‘high’ in relation to political conversion is that there is a manifest and central intent among participants to achieve or arrest change through purposive communicative action. This in turn means that ‘supply side’ questions will tend to be foregrounded in this part of the analytical framework. It is also necessary to consider the domains in which these actions are located, to avoid conflating strategic political actions with routine social and commercial practices (for example, selling toothpaste is not the same as selling the case for a military invasion of Iraq). Therefore, the additional requirement for a communicative instance to be scored as ‘high’ in conversion terms is that there is evidence of a direct engagement with the domains commonly foregrounded in ‘bounded’ political definitions (i.e. sites of executive, judicial and legislative authority, other arenas governing political-economic structures and
practices, and matters engaging with issues and cultural rights). This engagement can be assimilative (seeking change within these existing systems) or oppositional (repudiating their legitimacy and validating 'ideological outsidership' [Grant, 1995]).

If 'supply side' issues are emphasized in cases of 'high' conversion, 'demand side' issues dominate in instances of 'high' political communion, as effective communion is ultimately the gift of the congregation. Although it is difficult to think of any concrete instances where communicators are completely disinterested in the concerns and orientations of their audience (a declaration of war, perhaps?), there are evidently cases where demand side considerations are more salient than others. Therefore, the first criterion for registering a communicative instance as 'high' in communion terms is the existence of, or a perception of the need to establish, a strong empathic connection between consumers and producers. Here again, further clarification is required, as there are cases where communicators seek communion more selectively, privileging contact with specific subcultures, elite networks or other, specifically defined, 'quality minorities'. On these occasions, general communion may be deemed an irrelevance or even something to be consciously avoided (in some cases, establishing selective communion depends on demonstrating exclusivity). These situations should be rated as 'medium' on the communion scale as 'high communion' requires a wider, *popular* engagement. Etymologically, the word 'popular'
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... derives from the Latin for 'of the people' and a review of dictionary definitions provides a range of phrases that collectively clarify what is required for a communicative instance to be deemed 'high' in communion terms. These include: 'of or relating to, the general public', 'suitable to the majority', 'frequently encountered or widely accepted', 'adapted to or indicative of the understanding and taste of the public' and 'commonly liked or approved'.

To help elaborate these points I shall conclude with some specific illustrations of how the model might be applied to differentiate communicative instances. The first compares the positioning on the communion-conversion axis of four communicative instances related to gay and lesbian identity politics. In part, this case has been chosen to demonstrate the broader potential use of the model outside of a media-centred framework.

**Mapping gay and lesbian politics**

The first communicative instance I shall consider is the strategy used by the gay and lesbian rights pressure group, Outrage, to expose in the media the secret homosexual orientations of influential political and cultural figures who condemn homosexuality and oppose gay civil rights. In my judgement, 'outing' qualifies as 'high' in conversion terms and 'low' in communion terms (see Figure 1, point a1) as it is a calculatedly confrontational political act, which its proponents accept is likely to alienate public opinion. But these 'shock tactics' are deemed necessary to expose hypocrisy in high places and 'to force an uncaring, intolerant society to address the concerns of the down-trodden' (Cronin, 2001).

The second instance is of a large public demonstration organized by a coalition of gay rights campaigners and trade unions in Scotland, to urge the Scottish Parliament to repeal Section 28 of the 1987 Local Government Act (which prohibits local authority promotion of homosexuality). The demonstration was conceived as a 'broad-based, grassroots event... intended to attract everyone, heterosexual or non-heterosexual, who believes in the concepts of equality and diversity' (www.diversity.org.uk/equality/news.html, 4 June 2001). Thus the event's content, timing, location and intention means it evidently qualifies as 'high' in conversion terms and its related emphasis on mobilizing a coterie of like-minded citizens means it deserves grading as 'medium' to 'high' in communion terms (see point a2).

The third instance is of the annual gay and lesbian Mardi Gras, held in Sydney. This flamboyant procession and its associated events now involves every major cultural institution in the city, tens of thousands of participants, hundreds of thousands of spectators and attracts national television coverage. In 1999, it was estimated that the festivities contributed AUS$99
million to the New South Wales economy. In my judgement this case rates more highly than the anti-clause 28 demonstration in communion terms, as it is an event that generates a far wider popular engagement. But in conversion terms I would rate it below both previous examples (see point a3), because although the festival originated in protest against gay discrimination and police harassment, over the years the focus has shifted to ‘celebration and fun’ (http://www.mardigras.com.au/SGLMG.html).

The final instance is the organization of a social event for gay and lesbian students at a university. Sociality offers a basis for solidarity and the fact that such an event is organized demonstrates a public acknowledgement of the specific needs of this constituent minority. For these reasons, the event cannot be said to be devoid of conversion considerations (see point a4). Nevertheless, I believe it only warrants classifying as ‘low’ in conversion terms as it is an example of a community engaging with itself rather than negotiating its position and asserting its rights in broader terms. It has little of the external orientations and declarative intent evident in the other cases to varying degrees. This selectivity also means the event warrants rating as ‘medium’ in communion terms, as in this case, mutuality, sharing and communality involve recognizing the distinctive needs of gay and lesbian students.

Transitions in advertising

For the second case I use the communion-conversion model to chart shifting trends in advertising forms and practices over recent decades, to demonstrate the model’s possible use in highlighting historical changes in communication practices (which in turn reflect changing relations between media consumers and producers).

The earliest forms of advertising were simple in design and instrumental in purpose. As such they can be conceptualized as ‘medium’ in conversion terms and ‘low’ in communion terms (as only crude attempts were made to connect with the broader social concerns and aspirations of their intended audiences) (see point b1). As the 20th century progressed, advertisers had to confront increasingly reflexive consumers and an ever more competitive marketplace. Consequently, concepts of lifestyle advertising started to emerge, as advertisers sought to establish a more humanistic contact with consumers and the emphasis shifted from the selling of products to marketing the ‘added value’ of particular brands. As part of this trend, advertising forms became more complex, and the context and background in adverts began to take over, often producing a highly oblique relationship between advertising images and the products being sold (Dyer, 1982). By the late 1970s, a significant two-way shift in mainstream advertising practices becomes evident (see point b2) – ‘up’ the communion scale (as
advertisers strove to create an empathic link with the aspirations of consumers) and 'down' the conversion scale (as advertisers sought to mask the promotional intent of their texts and to imply their brands provided 'answers to more interesting problems' [Davidson, 1992: 44]).

Since the 1980s, advertisers and their clients have become more sophisticated in their understanding of consumer markets and we see a shift from mass marketing to niche marketing in which advertisers seek to target more precisely 'quality minorities' in their promotional work. At the same time, interest has grown in 'stealth advertising' techniques in which promotions are smuggled into, or embedded within, entertainment and information forms (Murdock, 1991). As an account director of a major international advertising agency recently explained:

Clients are becoming more and more interested in communicating their brands in non-advertising ways. . . . Brands themselves are becoming recessive, the idea being that while consumers watch a client's piece of information or an informative film, they are culturally steered towards a particular brand. (The Guardian, 18 Sept. 2000)

For these reasons, I believe an additional shift in advertising trends can be traced during the 1980s and 1990s, comprising a movement down the communion scale and down the conversion scale (see point b3).

Of course, this necessarily sketchy overview of advertising trends skates over important complexities and contradictions in advertising history. For example, a minor but countervailing trend has also developed over the recent period in which some advertisers have addressed issues relating to the 'high' domain of political conversion (environmentalism, human rights, race relations) as a means of effecting greater communion with the politically sophisticated and discriminating consumers they wish to target (see point b4). Whereas some in the industry see this as a win-win situation in which commercial promotion and social responsibility mutually benefit, other critics perceive it as a more cynical exercise in appropriating, exploiting and neutering the discourses of political activism for commercial branding purposes (for example, Klein, 2000).

This last point raises a significant underlying issue regarding the relationship between communion and conversion. The pursuit of high communion is commonly recognized as a means by which political figures pursue conversion objectives covertly (for example, the opportunistic politician playing up xenophobic beliefs to gain votes). But the reverse principle can also apply, in which political conversion pretensions are exploited as a means of achieving communion. For example, in soap opera production it has been noted that many shows incorporate contemporary social and political themes as a deliberate strategy for enhancing audience perceptions of their relevance and controversialism. This reveals an 'excessive ratings consciousness' that 'warps' the frame until both
content and style are disengaged from the aesthetic criteria which gives soaps their value as stories. Transmission, as it were, has triumphed over ritual' (Watson, 1998: 136).

Concluding remarks

It is not possible in the confines of this article to elaborate further examples of uses of the communion–conversion matrix (although several already occur to me). I must emphasize that at this stage the model is highly speculative. Nevertheless, if the communion–conversion distinction has any value, I hope it is in helping to introduce greater precision in debates about the multifaceted nature of political communication. For so much time has been spent arguing where and when 'meaningful' politics ends, that insufficient effort has been made to differentiate between types and levels of political activity.

In an influential categorization Nancy Fraser (1995) distinguishes between the ‘politics of redistribution’ and the ‘politics of recognition’. Although in her analysis these are embedded within an emancipatory project, they can also be applied more descriptively to apply to any contest over the distribution of material resources and cultural rights. Conceived in these terms, redistribution and recognition represent the twin arenas of ‘high’ political conversion – ideology in the raw. However they are not defining features of ‘high communion’ where ‘high conversion’ is not also an associated feature. If anything, this domain is about the ‘politics of cognition’ and the ‘politics of distribution’ – in which cultural actors negotiate their spaces, strengthen allegiances, create their meanings, pursue preferences and develop coping strategies within prevailing value systems and socio-economic structures. This activity is not pointless. It is not passionless. It is not powerless. But in the main it relates to tactical rather than strategic engagement (Silverstone, 1990). As Lindlof perceptively comments in relation to active audience research: ‘While interpretive communities often form as oppositional entities in extraordinary circumstances, it is far more common for a group to negotiate via selective usage of mediated content the terms of its relationship to legitimized interests’ (1988: 82)

This acknowledgement in turn helps us appreciate that communion is not intrinsically a state of grace. Communion can be about apathy as well as activity, complacency as well as creativity, ideological closure as well as interpretative freedom. By the same token, sweeping generalizations about the heretical qualities of certain dominant modes of conversion need to be questioned. For example, while public relations is often readily dismissed as ‘manipulative propagation’ (Habermas, 1996: 49) used to debase and
control public discourse, some recent work has also identified its pro-
gressive and pro-social potential in certain cases (Shoemaker, 1989).

Therefore, judgements are better made case-by-case rather than by
totalizing assertion when considering political conversion and communion.
This in turn brings into focus a defining paradox of holistic research: that
broadening our perspective requires a narrowing of our research claims.
The key to holism is humility.

Notes

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1. See for example, Fiske’s tendentious assertions about the radical potential and
subversive qualities of the dating game show, Perfect Match (1989: 141).

2. Because of this, Burston identifies an ‘essential’ need ‘for new research to
continue analysing the specific conditions, times and spaces of any given instance

3. Of course complex issues of evaluating and interpreting evidence remain. But
these are no more acute than those involved in analysing audience-based evidence.
Moreover, if one follows the logic of these kinds of reservations about textual
decomposition, then they must also be seen to apply to analyses of reception
processes. In other words, researchers’ interpretations of audience readings may
also be just ‘another decoding . . . a product of the [researcher’s] cultural and
communicative repertoires’.

4. For example, it could be used to chart trends in documentary production in
the UK, from the serious and highly patrician approach of ‘Panorama’ in the 1950s
(high conversion – low communion), through the more accessible and engaged
public affairs reporting exemplified by ‘World in Action’ in the 1960s and 70s
(high conversion – high communion), to the ‘docu-soaps’ of the contemporary era
(low conversion, high communion).

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