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Reporting politics:

enlightening citizens
or undermining democracy?

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“The press and politicians. A delicate relationship. Too close, and danger ensues. Too far apart and democracy itself cannot function without the essential exchange of information”

Howard Brenton and David Hare,
Pravda, Act I, Scene 3

“Journalism is to politician as dog is to lamp-post.”

H.L. Mencken, *The Oxford Dictionary of
Literary Quotations*

In recent years there have been many criticisms that political reporting has ‘dumbed down’. For some observers, political journalists increasingly concentrate on ‘personality politics’ rather than serious issues and policies (for debate, see Langer, 2011). In addition, the growth of aggressive public relations tactics by political parties attempting to control or ‘spin’ the news agenda has led to concerns that political journalists have become over-dependent on spin doctors, especially powerful governmental actors who often bully journalists into following their preferred line. Combined with concerns of overly partisan reporting, especially from print journalists, this has led to accusations that political journalism is failing in its duty to inform the public (Hargreaves & Thomas, 2002: 9). In an age when public contact with political elites is almost totally through the media, political journalists play a crucial role in liberal democracies. In order that the electorate can make rational choices, journalists must deliver accurate and relatively impartial information.

This chapter assesses these concerns. It begins with the rec-

ognition that a key challenge for political journalists is how to avoid becoming a megaphone for party and government propaganda machines – and avoid acting merely as a conduit for the ideological preferences of their employers – while still providing up to date commentary on key political events of the day in a way that engages and serves their wider audience. In order to draw out these issues in concrete terms, we next turn to consider the 2010 general election. According to some commentators, it signalled a fundamental shift in the role of the political journalist. The first televised leaders' debates in British political history had a far greater impact on both the public and the media's election coverage than was expected, as well as adding a new layer of personalisation to UK politics. Newspaper political reporters, in particular, used to interpreting and analysing the day-to-day events of election campaigns, found themselves reacting to events rather than setting the agenda. Allegations of bias against political broadcasters from all channels placed editorialising under the spotlight. There was also criticism of the role played by increasingly high-profile and opinionated television commentators, whose emergence as 'personalities' rather than straight reporters has raised concerns about both their impartiality and their role as a 'fourth estate'. The cumulative challenges to political journalism's authority, as we shall see, are clearly considerable.

The challenge to the democratic role of political journalism

There is little doubt about the importance of informed political journalism in a democracy. Indeed, most journalism histories have traditionally mythologised the role of journalism as a 'fourth estate', acting as a 'watchdog' on behalf of the public by holding the powerful to account for their actions (see Cole & Harcup, 2010). Generations of newspaper proprietors have cited this role as a rationale against any curbs on 'the freedom of the press'. For well over a century, despite economic and ideological ties to key groups within society, the press (and later the broadcast news media) have managed to represent themselves as being above the fray, independent observers of events they merely report upon.

There is disagreement about the originator of the phrase 'the fourth estate', but the term achieved popular recognition

in 1828, when the great historian and Whig politician Thomas Babington Macaulay pointed towards the reporters in the press gallery of the House of Commons and called them 'the fourth estate of the realm'. There has been considerable disagreement about what the other three estates were, but in a British context the church, judiciary and commons are usually cited (see Allan, 2010). The key point is that the press, anxious for both respectability and for recognition of their claims to represent public opinion, were quick to adopt and popularise the title.

It provided an intoxicating vision of a free press working for the greater public good. To a large extent, the 'fourth estate' ideal has survived into the 21st century, even when the power of owners and multi-media corporations has been clear to see. No serious observer of their history and current activities would represent our news media as neutral observers. The self-perpetuating power of the 'fourth estate' myth has been quite staggering. As the journalism historian Martin Conboy notes, the idealistic claim that the press has operated as a watchdog for the public is 'high on emotive value but low on concrete evidence' (2004: 109-110). That said, our news media may be imperfect watchdogs, but without them our knowledge of the activities of the powerful would be much less.

Barnett & Gaber (2001: 12-13) propose three contributions that 'good' political journalism can make to democracy. First – and they admit this is perhaps the most complex and problematic function – is by acting as 'tribunes of the people', representing the views of the 'multitude' to political representatives. Second, the media can convey 'accurate, intelligible and comprehensive knowledge' to allow citizens to formulate their own responses to political events and thereby participate in the political process. Third, they can contribute to that process of public opinion formation by providing a forum in which citizens can share their views and allow 'a collective view to evolve'. How far journalists and news media perform these functions is much disputed. Barnett & Gaber, in concluding their analysis, argued that the future was bleak for the 'fourth estate' and its democratic role.

A decade on from this prediction, the 2010 election provided some evidence that both the influence and interpretative role of political journalists, especially in newspapers, was being challenged by the first-ever British televised leaders' debates

and the rapid public response via relatively instant opinion polling. However, in an age when face-to-face communication with our rulers is so rare as to be effectively non-existent, the media delivering information in a 'comprehensible and accessible' way (Franklin, 2004, p.11), is likely to be the only means by which the masses are able to judge their governments and those aspiring to govern. Equally, the public will often regard this information as unbiased and impartial, especially when it comes from the mainstream broadcasters.

It is important that the public have access to relatively impartial political information, and not party political propaganda and 'spin', passed on by lazy or partisan political journalists. The misleading information about Iraq's non-existent 'weapons of mass destruction', used to justify the invasion of Iraq in 2003, was peddled to the public by journalists who failed to interrogate New Labour's spin machine. Such failures have damaged the reputation of political journalism in Britain, as have claims about the over simplification and personalisation of political coverage.

Has political coverage 'dumbed down'?

The belief that commercial pressures have led to a dumbed down media 'failing to explain, inform and analyse' is widespread (Moore, 2007: 38). Some argue for a more complex diagnosis (McNair, 2003) but, if the doomsayers are right, the repercussions for the health of 'democracy' are huge. At the centre of liberal democratic theory – how democracies should work – is the necessity for an informed and engaged public. The performance of governments has to be judged every few years in the voting booth. If we are not informed enough to make such a decision, the argument goes, governments will not necessarily be held accountable for their mistakes or indeed rewarded for their successes. And if we are not engaged enough, then democracy itself is called into question (Puttnam, 2000). The media's supposed dumbing down has frequently been cited as a major contributor to declining voter turn-out in Britain, with a consequently apathetic public disengaging from the political system (see Temple, 2006). In general elections, barely three-fifths of the electorate bother to make the short trip to the polling booth.

It is argued that when there are limited alternative ways

of receiving information on a given subject, audiences are dependent on the media (Ball-Rokeach, 1998). The public rely mainly on news media to deliver the information they need to make informed judgements about key social and political issues (Robinson & Levy, 1986) and studies by the Pew Center in the USA highlight this remains true despite the various means of gathering political information within online environments. Indeed, it has been argued that the public have a basic right to receive reliable information and, if the media fail to provide it, government regulation will be required to secure this (Kelley & Downey, 1995). If the news media are performing the roles Barnett & Gaber (2001) believe are necessary to maintain the health of democracy, they need to be supplying citizens with comprehensive information to allow them to participate fully in the political process.

Many observers have doubts about the ability of our modern news media to 'foster rational-critical debate among citizens' (Harrison, 2006: 100). On the other hand, there is an argument that 'rational-critical' discourse is merely only one way in which people absorb political information. And given the importance of participation in a democracy, it is necessary to engage a public who may be relatively uninterested in the intricate details of politics, so telling stories in 'entertaining ways' is an important part of any journalist's job (Harcup, 2009: 121). Indeed, the simplification and 'sensationalism' of serious political news can be seen as an essential part of the process of engaging people about the distribution of resources in modern democratic societies. Brian McNair believes that so-called dumbing down has produced political reporting which is 'more penetrating, more critical, more revealing' and, importantly, 'more demystificatory of power than the polite, status-conscious journalism of the past' (McNair, 2000: 60).

However, the concentration on 'personalities' and the lengths some journalists will go to dig out more sensational information, has raised questions about the ethical standards of journalists. The fact that journalists were found to be illegally hacking into voicemail and emails, as well as allegations about the nature of their relationships with both police and senior politicians, brings into question many of the practices of investigative journalism. Although the phone hacking scandal centred on News International, particularly The Sun and

the now defunct News of the World, there is evidence that unethical practice is not the sole preserve of Rupert Murdoch's newspapers. The revelations uncovered by Lord Leveson's inquiry into such behaviour and the fact that journalists have faced criminal charges, threatens both the independence of the media and public trust in journalists. The problems are much wider than the reporting of politics – the majority of illegal activity concerned celebrities - but one aspect of modern day political journalism, the focus on the private lives of politicians, is an area where the scandal is relevant. The allegation that details about Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott's extramarital affair were learned through intercepting telephone calls and emails raises issues of security as well as questions about how far journalists can and should go to uncover such revelations. While politicians' private and sexual liaisons may be of interest to the public, whether such journalism is in the public or national interest is a moot point. The result of Leveson may be that journalists have to be more transparent about their sources, which will not only have implications on their operation as investigator; it could also reveal any overt bias in their approach to reporting politics.

Is political journalism tainted by bias?

The scandal is a corollary of the media search for audiences and readers that has led to an evolution in the production of news. The problems with political journalism, however, go much deeper than a search for salacious details of the goings on in the bedrooms of politicians. It is argued that much political journalism is no longer news but views. While journalists may claim they play the role of interpreter by explaining the implications of events to a largely disengaged public, this noble activity, when scrutinised, can be suggested to be as corrosive upon public engagement as it is empowering.

All political reporters present events from their own perspectives, whether they are tabloid journalists such as the Sun's Trevor Kavanagh, or broadcasters like the BBC's Nick Robinson, ITV's Tom Bradby or Sky News' Adam Boulton. These views permeate public perceptions and present not only potentially biased accounts of events but also equally skewed perspectives of the motivations of key decision makers, of-

ten focusing on the potential implications of their actions on public support or party unity rather than the broader good of the nation. While it is often less than clear how these heavyweights form their opinions (for example, how much of it has been spun by the party spin doctors?) they become the authority figures whom the wider public rely upon for their political information. Nick Robinson, once chairman of the Young Conservatives, is frequently accused of bias by all sides (e.g., <http://liberalconspiracy.org/2010/05/14/backlash-against-nick-robinson-for-pro-tory-bias/>) but so are Tom Bradby and Adam Boulton. Accusations of partiality intensified during the 2010 election campaign, illustrated by the live on-air spat just days after the election when former Labour spin-doctor Alastair Campbell told Sky's Adam Boulton that both he and Sky News had been guilty of anti-Labour bias

The online public sphere

Yet any newspaper and broadcasting bias may not be crucial to public understanding. The public no longer need to rely on television, radio or newspaper journalists for their political information. This can be obtained directly from the websites of politicians and political parties, increasingly a range of other broadcasting tools they employ such as Twitter, as well as both independent and politically aligned sources of political information. The blogosphere, a collective term used to describe the network of weblogs (online diaries), is full of political information containing a range of ideological biases, insider revelations and interpretations of news stories. For example, Paul Staines, aka Guido Fawkes, focuses a highly sceptical eye over our elected representatives: ConservativeHome casts an independent gaze over the Tory party. Not only are such sites available as alternative, and importantly free, sources of political information for public access; they are equally sources of news for journalists. With pressures of time constraining a journalist's ability to investigate, stories that begin life on one weblog or as a politician's tweet can become viral through the online communicative ecosystem and lead the news agenda.

But how reliable are such sources? For example, leading Conservative blogger Iain Dale admits that his and other Conservative supporting sites (along with those of Labour and

the Liberal Democrats), 'effectively neutered [themselves] for the duration of the [2010 election] campaign' because no one wanted to be blamed for 'jeopardising his party's victory' (Dale, 2010). Those voters seeking accurate information from such sites would be sorely disappointed.

In fact, it is argued that rather than representing a new public sphere, as Papacharissi (2002) argued, the online environment is often used more to reinforce pre-existing ideas and prejudices than to seek new information (see Hindman, 2009). Many politics weblogs and forums serve as ideological cyberghettos where contributors chant 'me too' rather than challenging ideas. Users receive a highly filtered version of the news, receiving their 'Daily Me' by RSS feeds or news aggregators (Sunstein, 2007) rather than independent, critical analyses that allow for informed evaluation and decision making.

The much vaunted 'citizen journalist' (see Hudson & Temple, 2010, for a critique of the concept) has yet to unravel the hegemony of the mainstream news providers. While examples such as the safe landing of US Airways flight 1549 on the Hudson River are often cited as demonstrating the power of Twitter to undermine the capacity of journalists as repositories of news, there are few examples of citizen journalists breaking news stories on a regular basis. However, Davis (2008) argues that there is a symbiotic relationship between journalists and bloggers where both inform, amplify and develop the work of the other, arguably enhancing the public sphere and pluralism. Chadwick (2011) describes this as the political news information cycle where journalists and a range of contributors all feed into an evolving news agenda. This positive perspective has a number of detractors who suggest the majority of online content creators are an elite minority working with their own agenda (see Hindman, 2009). While it is clear that such sources can lead the news agenda, in actuality such moments are rare in Western democracies and it is largely the mainstream media who shed light on events in the political life of a nation.

The late Elizabeth Edwards, wife of Senator John Edwards (a United States Democratic vice-presidential nominee in 2004) argued that the 'vigorous press that was deemed an essential part of democracy at our country's inception is now consigned to smaller venues, to the Internet and, in the mainstream media, to occasional articles' (Edwards, 2008). Mrs Edwards ac-

knowledged that serious newspapers and magazines still carried analytical articles and public television broadcasts carried in-depth reports. But her concerns about dumbing down resonated with many observers of American (and increasingly, British) politics. She believed that:

“every analysis that is shortened, every corner that is cut, moves us further away from the truth until what is left is . . . what I call strobe-light journalism, in which the outlines are accurate enough but we cannot really see the whole picture.”
(Edwards, 2008)

Her argument is reminiscent of the ancient Greek philosopher Plato’s ‘allegory of the cave’, used to substantiate Plato’s claim that only those with the greatest knowledge should rule (Griffith, 2000).¹

Shadows on the wall

Perhaps the cave allegory (or ‘analogy’) is worth applying more widely to the provision of political information. As events and arguments are increasingly filtered by journalists and bloggers and rumour and partial leak often treated as facts, there is no time allowed for investigation or considered analysis, as this would offer an edge to the competition. Partial and poorly-sourced information is increasingly all that is available. Like the chained inhabitants of Plato’s cave - that is, the masses - who see only the shadows of events outside their direct experience, the casual reader of political news is shackled and prevented from seeing the true light. Instead the world is shown in shadow form, reflected by the light but shown in shadows and shapes which are open to interpretation.

This is not to say that journalists alone should be blamed for a failure to shed sufficient light onto political activities. Politicians themselves avoid the glare of scrutiny and attempt to restrict that which is seen in clear relief. Often, we can barely make out the machinations of political decision-makers and are restricted to guessing at what occurs in the shadows. This partly explains the universal condemnation by the political class - and some would say, state persecution - of the activities of Julian Assange, founder of WikiLeaks. Assange’s online re-

lease of government cables and information makes it clear that politicians' public pronouncements are often radically different from their private beliefs.

This then is the crux of a problem at the heart of the political culture of democracies in late modernity. Journalists constrained by market demands lack the time to reflect but need to produce copy. Politicians seek favourable coverage and attempt to control and restrict access to information in order to get the copy they want. The public seek information that is easily digestible and helpful for decision making. These three factors appear to conflict with one another, creating a vicious cycle, as well as being incompatible with enhancing a civic democratic culture.

Spin and political journalism

A major obstacle to informed reporting is the tendency of all governments to attempt to manage or 'spin' the news. Governments have always sought to manage information. Samuel Pepys was paid 30 shillings a year by King Charles II for advice on how to manage his relationship with journalists, which given the fate of the King's father seems a small price to pay for a better press (Temple, 2008: 154). However, in a mass media age, the urge to control the political agenda has become increasingly important and the 'spin doctor' has become a ubiquitous figure in most organisations.

The creation of the 'welfare state' by the Labour government of 1945-51, and the subsequent need to inform the public of their entitlements, gave a central role to government management of information for the public good. This had led to a steadily increasing professionalization and marketization of political communication, with governments increasingly selling ideas and promoting their activities as opposed to simply delivering bland information (Franklin, 2004; Young, 2004).

While governments have always sought some measure of control, it was the election of Margaret Thatcher to the Conservative leadership in 1975 which really launched modern media manipulation by British political parties, importing many ideas from the United States. Leading figures from public relations were employed to remodel her voice and appearance. Her press secretary Bernard Ingham, a former journalist, was a key

figure in managing Thatcher's media relations. His remit, like all those who have held the role of 'communications advisor' or similar ever since, was to liaise with various journalists to generate positive coverage in order to bolster the reputation of the prime minister and government.

From the start of John Major's premiership in 1990, an increasingly anti-government media highlighted the inconsistencies between the sleaze of his ministers and his stated aim to pull British society back to living by 'basic family values'. Minister's extra-marital affairs, their progeny from those affairs, private business dealings and much of their non-political lives came under a microscope, challenging the authority of Major as prime minister. Tony Blair's reaction to this, and to almost two decades of a partisan press's hostility to the Labour party, was to place communication and image at the heart of his strategy in both opposition and government. The newspaper coverage Labour leader Neil Kinnock received during the 1980s and 1990s was effectively character assassination (Greenslade, 2002). Peter Mandelson, Labour's Director of Communications for much of Kinnock's leadership, was determined it would not happen again when Tony Blair became leader – and political journalists who refused to play the game were excluded or marginalised. This unhealthy 'dance with the media' had negative consequences for the democratic ideal of an informed public. Arguably it is also a factor in the events that led to the Leveson Inquiry, which while focusing on the culture, practices and ethics of tabloid journalists has equally highlighted issues about the power of the media over politicians and the extraordinary political influence they wield in exchange for offering favourable coverage.

Tony Blair and his advisers took the relatively crude and essentially ideologically-driven tactics of pre-New Labour spin doctors to new heights. Indeed, the Blair government has been primarily characterised as obsessed with its media coverage. Blair's press secretary Alastair Campbell, formerly political editor of the Daily Mirror, was frequently characterised as second only to Blair in importance. Campbell became the story, and something of a celebrity, while spin became a corrosive element at the heart of Blair's government. The reputation of spin and its practitioners reached a new low in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks on the USA, when the Labour government's spin doctors sought to 'bury bad news' – that is, release potentially embar-

passing information knowing that it would be lost in the wall-to-wall coverage of the 'attack on America'.

Spin can backfire and on occasion that can have serious consequences. In October 2007, new Prime Minister Gordon Brown had enjoyed a blissful 'honeymoon' period in office and his opinion poll ratings were high. Number Ten staff started to create an expectation of an early election. Key policy announcements were brought forward. Gordon Brown paid an unexpected and lightning visit to British troops in Iraq and then issued a surprise announcement that there would be substantial troop withdrawals. Newspapers were full of election fever but when opinion polls indicated a revival of David Cameron's fortunes Labour hastily pulled back, announcing that there would be no election until at least May 2009. Government ministers tried to spin the decision as being all the media's fault for whipping up speculation, but Benedict Brogan, political editor of the Daily Mail, pointed out that Labour spin doctors had been actively briefing political correspondents that there would be an election – in effect, stoking up the flames (speaking on BBC Radio 4 Today, 8 October 2007). Newspapers universally carried this message. The backlash from Labour's efforts to spin the unspinnable was immediate and damaging: a negative press for 'dithering' Gordon Brown, who no longer appeared electorally unassailable, and the beginning of an impression that David Cameron was a potential prime minister. The consequence of the flawed spinning exercise was to create a new spin, one which gathered momentum and proved difficult to counter, of a 'bumbling and blundering' prime minister (Rawnsley 2007). As Liberal Democrat MP Vincent Cable cuttingly noted in Parliament, Gordon Brown moved in a few days 'from Stalin to Mr. Bean' (BBC News, 28 November 2007).

The decline of deference

Contiguous to the process of spin and professionalization has been a decline of deference towards authority figures in the last 50 years. The media has become a highly critical force, especially among newspapers unbound by legal requirements for neutrality. An increasingly more aggressive press – the arrival of Rupert Murdoch in 1968 is perhaps no coincidence – contributed to the problems. At its best, modern political coverage includes greater scrutiny of the activities of elected representatives and their staff:

however, there is also a greater willingness, if not outright relish, to carry negative and highly personal stories by the media. Political news gathering has shifted away from codes of practice where a testing question would be preceded by 'with all due respect' as was the case in the immediate post-war era. The BBC's Jeremy Paxman's approach to political interviewing is characteristic of a more hostile reporting environment where the media often sees itself as a force of opposition to elected representatives – the 'Rottweiler journalist' is a key figure in the 21st century political landscape (Barnett, 2002). Thus, a game of attack and counterattack has developed in which journalists and politicians circle one another seeking to win a battle that is increasingly high stakes.

What is at stake may be open to some degree of speculation and subjectivity, depending on the importance one places upon gaining the right type of coverage. Equally the nature of the relationship between politicians and journalists can be open to interpretation, with more sympathetic accounts placing them both as victims of their environment. Aeron Davis argues both find themselves living a life that is: 'fleeting, nomadic, flexible, multi-task oriented, and encourages weak social ties'; in turn this shapes a role that has evolved to 'the gathering of "pseudo" rather than substantive forms of expertise, many weak social ties and thin forms of communication and human exchange' (Davis, 2010: 65-6). Journalists and politicians alike find themselves squeezed by constituents or audiences, public opinion or advertisers, parties or editors and they both exist in a highly pressurised environment which is not of their making. Newspaper journalists are perhaps the most under pressure. While formerly they would be able to take the lead on presenting the implications of an event the following day, with television news being caught within the immediacy of the moment, technology is denying newspapers the luxury of their former role - producing more considered analysis. It is argued that this leaves little opportunities to give real insight to stories. Instead, it is the temperature that is increased, raising questions about the contribution of journalism to democracy.

The impact of the media on voters

All of this feverish activity, especially during an election campaign, suggests that the media are extraordinarily influential and yet there is much disagreement about the nature and extent of

their influence (see Burton, 2005: 97-102). Many other influences (home, work, education) affect our political beliefs and the huge number of media outlets makes it difficult to ascribe impact to, for example, any one newspaper or television programme. The media clearly play a powerful role in transmitting messages to the electorate but all claims of direct influence on voting behaviour need to be treated with caution. The influence of political journalists is probably over-stated.

British newspapers tend to be fiercely partisan, yet there is no consensus about the impact of that partisanship on voting patterns (Gavin and Saunders, 2003: 576). That said, academic research tends to support the belief that, over time, newspapers appear to exert a 'significant influence on voting results'. This is especially the case when there is 'little to choose' between the parties and voters therefore 'need a cue' (Newton and Brynin, 2001: 282). The impact may be small, but it is sufficient to make a difference in close contests, and the 2010 election was among the tightest in British political history.

Election 2010: changing politics and political journalism for ever?

On the day of the first ever televised leaders' debate in British political history, the BBC's deputy political editor, James Landale (2010), presciently pointed out that the debates could be 'moments of genuinely democratic television' helping the nation to decide. Even more presciently, he noted that they offered the Liberal Democrats and their leader Nick Clegg a 'heaven-sent opportunity' to get their message 'direct to [the] electorate'. For Alastair Stewart, who chaired the first debate on ITV, they allowed a large television audience 'to judge the quality of the answers and the relative merits of the exchanges with no further mediation' (letter to Daily Telegraph, 28 April, 2010: our emphasis).

The three debates were accompanied by instantaneous audience reaction and the emergence of a 'winner'. Sophisticated tracking tools were used to assess how audiences reacted to the arguments presented by Brown, Cameron and Clegg. This analysis was accompanied by vox populi pieces from the captive audience and results from a YouGov poll which had to be completed by their online panel within the last minutes of the televised debate programme. The studio audience, the simul-

taneous 'worm' tracking viewer responses (involving just 12 people in a studio) and the instant nationwide poll, meant that voters largely bypassed the traditional interpretative role of, in particular, the press. Therefore, the newspaper verdicts next day were largely redundant - and both the public and the press seemed to realise this. While newspaper assessments were arguably more reflective (Gaber 2010) their responses tended towards overt and often farcical partisanship.

Clegg's unexpected success during the first debate resulted in the Sun, Telegraph, Mail and Express 'explod[ing] in unison' (Glover, 2010). The traditional Tory newspapers, in particular the Mail titles, were made to look ridiculous by the inanity of much of their response and by the instant spoofing from online sites and social media. The Daily Mail's response to the rise of Cleggmania demonstrated real fear of Nick Clegg's challenge. Its front page headline, disinterring an old newspaper article to allege 'Clegg in Nazi Slur on Britain' (22 April, 2010), must have been embarrassing for the paper's journalists, and negative stories on expenses, donations, and lobbying followed (23 April, 2010). In response, tweeters using the hashtag #nickcleggsfault parodied such articles by listing an increasingly unfeasible catalogue of events that Nick Clegg was responsible for: for instance, it was 'Clegg's fault' for the volcanic ash that had grounded Europe's jets. Perhaps the nadir was reached when the Mail on Sunday asked 'is there anything British about Nick Clegg?' (18 April, 2010, their emphasis) an undisguised and distasteful appeal to xenophobia against a British-born politician.

The Daily Mail's anti-Clegg campaign was risible, but did it and similar newspaper onslaughts affect support for the LibDems? While the efforts of Tory-supporting newspapers to convince their readers that 'it was Cameron wot won it' failed to prevent Clegg's immediate and unprecedented boost in polled opinion, they certainly believe they killed off 'Cleggmania'. The polling figures - 32 percent after the first debate, 23 percent for the LibDems in the real election - might appear to support that (Cathcart 2010). Raymond Snoddy (2010) agrees 'it is not conceivable' that the 'relentless barrage against the LibDems' could have had a significant impact. On the other hand, polls suggest that much of Clegg's new support was relatively 'soft', and composed of many young and still unsure voters. If it was the case that a hostile press affected Clegg's support, it was arguably a

rare illustration of their influence in 2010. What is more questionable, regardless of the level of influence enjoyed, is whether this is an appropriate role for political journalism to play within the context of an election and what this indicates about the media's relationship with the nation's democratic health.

Although both declining circulation and the public's engagement with the televised debates ensured the Tories' advantage in press support was significantly less important than in previous elections, their failure to win a majority further highlighted the press's inability to sell an agenda wholly supportive of their favourites. A variety of factors are influencing our opinions and our sources of news and information are increasingly eclectic, making it likely that newspapers, which have probably never been as powerful as they believed (Greenslade, 2010), have lost some of their agenda-setting power.

Newspapers often seemed sidetracked and irrelevant to the main political debate. Despite the often undeniable high quality of the analysis and commentary, especially in the 'qualities', the superficiality of much press (and television) coverage contributes to the belief that dumbing down best describes their 2010 election coverage. For example, the role of political spouse 'morphed' from an 'amusing sideshow' into a 'dominant feature of the British landscape' as their daily wardrobes were 'picked apart and priced for the next morning's newspapers' (Brogan 2010). The long-held assumption that the press set the daily political agenda during elections has been undermined by the televised debates and the 'resultant instantaneous polling' (Greenslade, 2010). Snoddy (2010) agrees it is true 'they have lost the power to set the political agenda' but believes that power was lost 'some time ago'.

However, it may be premature to write off the power of traditional political reporting and commentary. An examination of media coverage, political responses and public opinion changes during the 2010 campaign indicates overwhelming support for the belief that the traditional media retain considerable impact on the outcome of an election. Over half of voters polled in the final week said that media coverage of the campaign had influenced their voting intentions (Singleton, 2010) and it is likely that the press's influence was at its peak in the final week, once the TV debates were over (Snoddy, 2010). But the rise of new media outlets and the important role played by the televised leaders' debates indicate the rules of the game have changed forever. Britain's over-

partisan political press needs to recognise that reporting only the positive about the party you support is like covering an England football match without acknowledging opposition goals: 'in a modern media era when consumers are never far from an alternative news source, that just won't cut it' (Burrell, 2010). If the press are to remain influential they will need to avoid the public mockery that accompanied much of their 2010 coverage.

Conclusions

Critics of political journalism argue that it is biased, dumbed down, most interested in the personalities and process of politics, over-reliant on official sources and increasingly offering subjective commentary rather than information. All of these are true, in part. One can find evidence to support or disprove any hypothesis in this field. In reality, the British media provide a daily coverage ranging from quality, objective analysis of policy to over-simplistic, partisan and personalised accounts of the process of politics. The avid seeker of political information has myriad spaces in which to not only locate fine-grained detail on policy but also to comment, expand upon and share it. The allegations of dumbing down also ignore the needs of those who receive limited amounts of political information. They may not be media-dependent, and may buy a single newspaper for the sport, for example, catching only occasional glimpses of political news on television. They may see only a few shadows of politics, caught in the strobe light of the news feeding frenzy over a gaffe, u-turn or personal indiscretion. If we believe that wide engagement is necessary for a healthy democracy, those who choose to be disengaged, and inhabit the furthest recesses of Plato's cave, present a challenge for the political journalist. The continuing legitimacy of Western political systems is dependent on the political media (in the broadest sense) successfully contributing to a nation's democratic health while also pleasing readers, advertisers and critics.

Political journalists currently tread a fine line between replicating party and government spin while also interrogating much of the information they receive. As the quote at the start of this chapter from Brenton and Hare's brilliant political satire *Pravda* indicates, the exchange of information between the political journalist and the politician is both necessary and inevitable. But they must

both be careful to strike the right balance: ‘too close, and danger ensues’, as both journalists and past and present prime ministers acknowledged to the Leveson Inquiry. Political journalism must also strike a careful balance between exposing the failings and rewarding the triumphs of politicians; arguably, far too much modern coverage of politics is negative and overly aggressive. H. L. Mencken’s famous analogy that the correct relationship between a journalist and politician is that of ‘dog to lamp post’ is amusing but unhelpful. If the electorate’s perception of politics, glimpsed in the shadows from the corner of the cave, is a world largely populated by the devious, ill-informed, corrupt or incompetent, they are unlikely to have a desire to engage. These are the key challenges facing political journalists.

Notes

1. In ironic and probably unconscious support of Elizabeth Edwards’s general argument, news of her husband’s affair with another woman (and birth of a child) had been published just a few months before her comments by the ‘smaller venue’ of the National Enquirer, a down-market tabloid sold mostly in American supermarkets. The mainstream media had effectively sidelined a story that, when it broke, ended John Edwards’ chance of becoming Barack Obama’s running mate in the 2008 presidential election.

Challenging Questions

- Debate the argument that political journalists should be ‘objective,’ effectively concealing their personal attitudes or ideologies in their reporting.
- Critically assess the belief that news coverage is being ‘dumbed down’.
- Are spin doctors ‘Machiavellian manipulators’ or ‘essential party servants in a political environment dominated by the mass media’?

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