

**Spinning out of control? New Labour and political journalism
in contemporary Britain**

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Sadly, in Britain, the machinery of news management is allowed to operate with the often active collaboration of the press and broadcasters. ... Too often the official managers of the political news have been allowed to dictate the agenda. ... By these means, the agenda for political discussion in Britain is largely set by Whitehall.

(Cockerell, Hennessy and Walker 1984: 9 and 11)

Once in government, Blair and his colleagues reached new heights in their ability to command favourable news coverage and to dominate the newspapers and the airwaves. Through the skilful orchestration of events and the sometimes all too eager support of willing accomplices in the news media, one day's damaging headlines can be obliterated the next. ... The effectiveness of the new government's media strategy could not be ignored. As the new administration settled into office, Tony Blair's popularity ratings rose rather than fell. Campbell's determination to control and coordinate the presentation of policy announcements paid handsome dividends, and the weeks when the government failed to set the news agenda were few and far between.

(Jones 1999: 2 and 13)

These two evaluations of the practice of news management by the government in Britain were written fifteen years apart, during which time major developments occurred in the structures, ownership and functioning of media organisations, important innovations were introduced in communications technology, significant changes took place in the practices of political journalism and New Labour replaced the Conservatives as the party of government. Yet both studies assess the nature of the interdependence between government and political journalists in broadly similar terms, bemoaning what they regard as the undesirable extent of governmental control over the media's news agenda, facilitated by the cooperation and compliance of many (though not all) journalists. The authors ought to know what they are talking about, since both books were written by respected political journalists with considerable professional experience in the press and broadcasting.

There can be no doubt that governments in Britain have over the years paid increasingly close attention to managing the political coverage of the news media. This is part of a growing emphasis accorded to communication activities by a range of political actors operating in a highly mediatised promotional culture where the drive to shape the news agenda and project a favourable image has become constant, obsessive and all-consuming (Wernick 1991). While in the past such a concern was largely the preserve of political parties during the short periods of election campaigns, political communication strategies and tactics now appear to infuse every facet of elite political behaviour. In terms of party competition, for example, Britain has embraced the age of the permanent campaign, in which parties are continuously battling to ensure that their version of events dominates media coverage and where electoral popularity is gauged on a continuing basis through the relentless publication of opinion polls. Academic commentators in Britain have variously described this process as 'packaging politics' (Franklin 1994), 'designer politics' (Scammell 1995) and 'the new marketing of politics' (Kavanagh 1995).

Nowhere in recent British politics has this trend been more evident than in the political communications approach of New Labour, first in opposition and then in government. Since its election victory in 1997 New Labour has placed communication at the heart of its methodology for the formulation and implementation of governmental policy-making, taking the idea of the public relations state to new heights (Deacon and Golding 1994: 4-7). It has regarded news media management as an integral part of contemporary governance, not an added optional extra. As a result, ministers and their advisers have tried to control or coopt the media in the task of selling New Labour to the electorate. This approach has had particular consequences for political journalists who have been seduced, bullied, courted and criticised in an attempt to ensure that they are as 'on-message' as New Labour's ministers and MPs.

The professionalism of New Labour's news management activities has been much commented on, not least by journalists (Jones 1999; Osborne 1999; Johnson 1999). Yet in seeking to harness the power of the media for its own political purposes, New Labour has also had to recognise limitations on its agenda structuring capabilities. These have included its failure to speak consistently with one voice, competition from other elite sources and the exposure and adversarial tendencies inherent in contemporary political journalism.

As a result, the power relationship between New Labour and political journalists cannot be satisfactorily presented as a simple top-down process in which politicians and their spin doctors impose their will on a subordinate media. Even though the government enjoys routine privileged access as a key official source for journalists, both a crude transmission belt model and the concept of government as primary definer are defective in important respects. This paper suggests that the mutual interdependence between the New Labour government and political journalists includes elements of bargaining as governmental actors engage in strategic and tactical deals with media actors (including proprietors as well as journalists) and of adversarial contestation as both sets of actors mobilise their respective resources against each other in their attempts to influence agenda construction and the framing of news coverage.

New Labour and news management

It is impossible to exaggerate the distance travelled by the British Labour party in its approach to political communication over the past twenty years. The seeds of Labour's coming to terms with the exigencies of the age of mediatised politics were sown in the aftermath of the catastrophic election defeat of 1983, when British politics was still dominated by the ideology of Thatcherism and the post-Falklands iconic imagery of the 'Iron Lady'. The disastrous electoral performance of Labour in the face of a Conservative party which had learnt to gear its marketing and public relations to the needs of the media, especially television, prompted a

reform of the Labour party's ideological positioning, policy proposals and political communications in a wide-sweeping process of modernisation which began under the leadership of Neil Kinnock (Shaw 1994; Hughes and Wintour 1990; Heffernan and Marqusee 1992).

With the declining importance of traditional partisan allegiances and the growth of a more consumerist attitude on the part of voters to their electoral preferences, the Labour leadership accepted that the 'mediatisation' of the party had become more important for electoral success. It determined, therefore, to foster a positive political communications culture within the party and put its relationship with the media on a sounder organisational footing. A key figure in the modernisation of Labour's communications strategy was its Director of Campaigns and Communications, Peter Mandelson, who masterminded Labour's 1987 election campaign.

Yet despite media-friendly campaigns in 1987 and 1992, the Labour party under Kinnock was unable to make the final breakthrough and win power. After Kinnock's resignation from the leadership of the party in the wake of the 1992 general election defeat, the process of modernisation was continued, first by John Smith and then in spectacular fashion by Tony Blair. The political communication ethos of the New Labour party (the name change from Labour to New Labour was itself symptomatic of the process of modernisation) was reinforced under Blair's leadership. Blair sought to build on Kinnock's reforms by strengthening the power of an inner core party elite based around the dominant position of the party leader to make policy and take charge of the party's strategic communications with the media (Heffernan and Stanyer 1996).

Labour had learnt several political communication lessons from its long period in opposition. First, manifestations of party disunity and intra-party conflict would be seized upon by the media, exploited for news purposes and turned to the party's electoral disadvantage. Divisions within the party were not just reported, but ruthlessly exploited and amplified by many journalists, especially those working for pro-Conservative newspapers, as evidence of a party unable to govern. Party unity, or at least the public semblance of unity, was perceived by New Labour's core leadership as an essential element in avoiding negative media coverage and promoting a positive response with public opinion.

Second, New Labour realised that it had to convey the image of a strong leader in charge of the party and embodying the party's values, not just capable of imposing leadership from the top but also being seen to do so. Image projection of Blair was designed to present him as possessing valued leadership qualities such as competence, integrity and firmness. Therefore, after his election as party leader Blair and his advisers moved quickly and effectively to shake off the initial media-inspired image of him as the Disney character 'Bambi', which they correctly regarded as an electorally damaging image if it were allowed to stick. The fact that Blair was a media-friendly and telegenic personality was a bonus in leadership terms.

Third, the core leadership accepted that policy formulation and communication were not distinct activities but had to be dealt with in an integrated fashion. Moreover, there was a recognition that some policies could not be sold to the electorate, however they were presented in communication terms. Skilful packaging could not disguise what a majority of the electorate consistently regarded as an unattractive product. During the 1980s, for example, attempts by the Labour party to persuade the electorate of the merits of its unilateralist nuclear defence policy were unsuccessful, not because the audience misunderstood the message but because a majority of them did not accept it.

In refashioning its relationship with the media New Labour recognised that, because of their high nationwide circulations, national newspapers were vitally important political communication actors, fulfilling an important agenda setting role both for other media and for their readers (Tunstall 1996). If Britain's national press remained dominated by pro-Conservative newspapers, then whatever the success of its political transformation New Labour would continue to face an uphill struggle in its attempts to win power. It was considered vital, therefore, to win as many national newspapers as possible over to the New Labour cause.

In the run-up to the 1997 general election New Labour was incredibly successful in achieving this objective, as several previously pro-Conservative national newspapers transferred their allegiance. Various factors help to explain the remarkable change in newspaper partisanship between 1992 and 1997 (McNair 2000: 146-155). First, several newspapers had become disenchanted with the failures of the Major premiership. Second, New Labour's ideological repositioning to appeal to the electoral centre ground made it a more acceptable alternative party of government for newspaper proprietors and editors. Third, Blair personally was regarded as a strong and effective leader who had played a key part in moving the party towards the centre ground. The combination of forceful leadership in the service of ideological moderation was graphically demonstrated in Blair's surprise move at the 1994 Labour party conference to drop the traditional collectivist wording of Clause Four from the party's constitution. Fourth, New Labour actively set out to curry favour with sections of the national press, most notably the newspapers of Rupert Murdoch's News International press group. Fifth, a more effective media management strategy ensured that New Labour attacks on Conservative government policy were skilfully prepared for journalists across a whole range of issues. Finally, as New Labour's electoral fortunes improved and opinion polls showed them pulling well ahead of the Conservatives, newspapers had good commercial reasons for modifying their attitudes towards New Labour and staying in tune with the views of their readers.

The 1997 election saw the triumph of New Labour's political communications approach. New Labour won in 1997 not because it fought an effective six week election campaign, but because it had fought a successful permanent campaign since the defeat of 1992 and in particular since Blair's election as party leader in 1994 (Crewe et al 1998; Butler and

Kavanagh 1997). On being elected to power, New Labour transferred to the task of government the political communications approach it had perfected in opposition.

That approach is made up of the following elements. First, it is underpinned by clear goals. In the art of promotion and concealment the New Labour government wants to dominate the media agenda and be in control as much as possible of issue selection and presentation. This involves managing the media's news agenda in a way which is favourable to New Labour and unfavourable to its opponents (agenda-setting) and cultivating an electorally favourable image via the media (image projection).

Second, the achievement of these goals requires a coherent media management strategy. This strategy consists of both proactive and reactive components (Heffernan and Stanyer 1998: 15). Proactive media management has been accorded a central role in the functioning of the New Labour government. The government creates news stories, stages events for media coverage and controls the release of information so that there is a steady flow of primary material detailing positive governmental activities and policy initiatives. The government can thus hope to feed the media's need for information in return for good publicity. An effective media management strategy also has to have a reactive component. 'Essentially this involves a damage limitation exercise, its aim to kill off or otherwise reduce the life expectancy of the "issue attention cycle" of a news story that casts the party in a non-advantageous position.' (Heffernan and Stanyer 1998: 16) The government cannot control events in the real world. But it has to be able to respond to them in a manner which limits potential damage and, if possible, turns the unexpected round to the government's advantage. Speed of response is an important part of a successful reactive strategy.

Third, the New Labour government's media management activities have been well organised and resourced. The government has introduced several important changes in this respect. For example, the Prime Minister's Chief Press Secretary has the joint status of civil servant and special adviser. This means that he can adopt an overtly more politically partisan approach in his relationship with the media than was formally the case with his predecessors. New Labour also increased the number of special advisers in government, several of whom fulfil a media relations role.

In addition, New Labour established a Strategic Communications Unit in Downing Street to plan and coordinate the government's media management activities. Controversially, the government also reorganised the Government Information Services, modernising the provision of official information from government departments and, in the eyes of some of its opponents, politicising the task of government information provision. Several government information advisers quit or were eased out as this task of professionalising the work of ministerial press offices was carried out in the first months of the New Labour government.

Overall, therefore, the government's communications strategy of command and control is reflected in a highly centralised organisation which seeks to coordinate governmental communications and impose a single message from the top down.

The Government's overall strategy is set by the Prime Minister; he relies on the Chief Press Secretary and the No. 10 Press Office to ensure that the essential messages and key themes which underpin the Government's strategy are sustained and not lost in the clamour of events. ... major interviews and media appearances have to be agreed in advance with the No. 10 Press Office, and policy statements have to be cleared with the No. 10 Private Office. The Chief Press Secretary and the No. 10 Press Office liaise with the departmental press offices to plan announcements in advance in order to secure a timely and well-ordered flow of significant government communications and they agree how best Departmental communications ... can play into the broader Government messages and themes and, by fitting in with this bigger picture, signal the coherence of what the Government as a whole is doing.

(House of Commons Select Committee on Public Administration 1998: xiii)

Fourth, New Labour's media management activities are run by highly professional personnel. The two key figures at the heart of this process have been Peter Mandelson and Alastair Campbell, both of whom enjoy a very close relationship with the Prime Minister. As Minister without Portfolio in the early months of the New Labour government, Mandelson was integral to the implementation of the government's news management strategy. However, with Mandelson's assumption of departmental ministerial responsibilities, it has been the power of the Chief Press Secretary, Alastair Campbell, which has attracted most attention. Campbell became Blair's press spokesman in 1994 and the two have risen together in a symbiotic relationship ever since. A former journalist with an intimate knowledge of how the media operate, Campbell speaks to the media with the authority of the Prime Minister himself. He attends Cabinet meetings and has acquired the reputation of having more influence in decision-making than policy advisers (Osborne 1999: 161).

It is not merely that Alastair is more political than Bernard [Ingham] [Thatcher's press secretary] and has carried further the imposition of a controlled output of government propaganda, but that he is higher in the Downing Street pecking order of determining how 'New Labour' wants to be seen. He is part of the inner circle of those who have given 'New Labour' its 'control freak' reputation.

(Roth 1999: 22)

In short, in its approach to news media management, the central role accorded communications in the process of policy-making and the professional quality of those in charge of its relations with the media, the New Labour government seems to possess all the attributes of a highly efficient and even ruthless political communications machine.

The power of government as an official source

The strategic emphasis placed on communications by New Labour reinforces the structural resources of authority and legitimacy which any British government possesses in functioning as an official source for political journalists in the mediatised construction of reality.

One way of theorising governmental power in this regard uses the concept of primary definition, which places the media in a subordinate and secondary role to major power holders

in society in the task of agenda construction. According to this account, the organisational demands and professional values of the news production process 'combine to produce a systematically structured *over-accessing* to the media of those in powerful and privileged institutional positions' (Hall et al. 1978: 58, emphasis in original). This 'permits the institutional definers to establish the initial definition or *primary interpretation* of the topic in question' (ibid, emphasis in original) As a result,

the media are frequently not the 'primary definers' of news events at all; but their structured relationship to power has the effect of making them play a crucial but secondary role in *reproducing* the definitions of those who have privileged access, as of right, to the media as 'accredited sources'. From this point of view, in the moment of news production, the media stand in a position of structured subordination to the primary definers.

(Hall et al. 1978: 59, emphasis in original)

In the literature on government and the news media in Britain the system of institutionalised briefings of political journalists known as 'the lobby' has been widely regarded as one of the main links in this structured relationship. Indeed, the lobby system of briefing has achieved a mythical status in the eyes of some commentators. Franklin, for example, contends that it has been 'appropriated by government as a conduit for information and, in this process, metamorphosed from an active and critical observer of political affairs into a passive purveyor of government messages' (Franklin 1994: 86). As a result, 'this rather furtive arrangement between politicians and journalists continues to offer governments of all political persuasions opportunities to influence the agenda of mainstream political discussion to a degree which must be considered unhealthy for a democracy' (Franklin 1994: 91). Franklin thus presents the lobby as an integral part of a process whereby those political journalists given accredited status effectively become part of the government's news machine.

There is no doubt that in the management of its relationship with political journalists the government benefits not only from its authoritative status, but also from its capacity to provide the media with information subsidies, measures to reduce the cost to information seekers of obtaining information they need to construct news (Gandy 1982). Information subsidies, it has been argued, apart from making life easier for reporters, reinforce 'a pattern of work which already places a great deal of emphasis on the collection of information from authoritative or regular sources' (Negrine 1996: 28). If journalists are really as 'lazy, self-serving and easily manipulated' as Thatcher's press secretary contended (Ingham 1991: 194), then they might easily be coopted into the government's attempts to manage the news.

This version of events seemed to apply with particular cogency to the Thatcher premiership of the 1980s. Her Chief Press Secretary, Bernard Ingham, bullied and cajoled journalists, using the lobby to promote the Prime Minister personally and, where necessary, brief against ministers who were out of favour (Harris 1990). The majority of national newspapers supported Thatcher in a particularly strident fashion, championing her government's combination of neo-liberal free market economics and authoritarian populism

(Gamble 1988). The ideological sympathy of several newspaper proprietors for Thatcherism meant that much newspaper political journalism was supportive of her premiership, especially at critical moments such as the Falklands conflict and the miners' strike and on major reforms such as trade union legislation and privatisation. Moreover, the Thatcher government was prepared to use censorship, restrictive legislation, coercion, intimidation and pressure on those media, such as the BBC, which were not regarded as 'one of us' and whose political output on various issues, most notably Northern Ireland, was considered suspect (Seaton 1994). Using the Thatcher premiership as an example, it seems possible, therefore, to build up a picture of the relationship between government and political journalism in Britain largely in terms of governmental dominance and journalistic subordination.

Limits on governmental power

The concept of primary definition has informed a considerable body of academic analysis on source-media relations. However, in so doing it has been subjected to important criticisms, most notably by Schlesinger (Schlesinger 1990). Several empirical studies have called into question some of the key assumptions regarding the government's power as a primary definer, demonstrating that the capacity of ministers and their officials to shape the news agenda by setting the terms of reference in which media coverage of an issue takes place is frequently highly constrained.

Three main weaknesses in the model of primary definition are particularly relevant to the relationship between New Labour and political journalists. First, the model assumes that the government is not subject to internal division and so speaks in public with one voice. It 'does not take account of contention between official sources in trying to influence the construction of a story' (Schlesinger and Tumber 1994: 18). Yet it is clear that no British government beyond the very short term is a monolithic entity, acting with a unified will and a single sense of purpose. Rather it is a divided and fragmented apparatus as has been shown in studies of its relations with the media in coverage of Northern Ireland (Miller 1993), the Falklands conflict (Morrison and Tumber 1988) and the poll tax (Deacon and Golding 1994).

Second, the model implies that 'the structure of access *necessarily* secures strategic advantages' for official sources and conversely that 'counter definitions can *never dislodge* the primary definition' (Schlesinger 1990: 66, emphasis in original). Yet the counter-definitional impact on the media of non-governmental sources needs to be borne in mind. The media regularly make use of other sources from a professional concern to cover an issue from different angles and, in the case of public service broadcasters, because they are also subject to regulations regarding impartiality and balance. Some sources may challenge the government's attempt to frame an issue in a particular way and may generate counter-definitions to try to displace the government's preferred primary definition. As a result,

government actors often find themselves competing against other discourses in their attempt to impose the official perspective.

Finally, the notion of primary definition as put forward by Hall et al tends 'to overstate the passivity of the media as recipients of information from news sources' (Schlesinger and Tumber 1994: 19). Yet the media may subject the state's definition of events to their own critical scrutiny, taking the initiative 'in the definitional process by challenging the so-called primary definers and forcing them to respond' (ibid). The alleged subordination of the media to the primary definers also fails to account for variations within and between media.

In similar vein the effectiveness of the lobby as a powerful tool of governmental news management has been called into question (Scammell 1995: 200). Even during the Thatcher premiership the notion that Ingham was able to manipulate the media because of the unattributable nature of his briefings was not convincing. Ian Aitken, former political editor of *The Guardian*, argues that

It seems to be contended that, because the information came from unnamed sources, it had to be shovelled into the papers more or less uncritically. This ... is bunkum and balderdash [a favourite phrase of Ingham's]. Every reporter who listened to Ingham on a daily basis was in a position to make his or her own judgement about the veracity of the information on offer. There was no obligation to print it. Indeed there was plentiful opportunity to check it against other sources, freely available around the corridors of the Palace of Westminster, and every chance to cast doubt on it. No, the real trouble with the Ingham circle was not the briefing system. It was the system of ownership of the newspapers represented at Sir Bernard's daily gatherings.

(Aitken 1991: 55)

More recently, Peter Riddell, the political columnist of *The Times* and former political editor of the *Financial Times*, has also downplayed the importance of the collective lobby briefing system, describing it as a 'minor source for any semi-competent political journalist' (Riddell 1999: 28). The sheer size of the lobby, now consisting of well over 200 journalists, also militates against the notion of the all powerful Number 10 Press Secretary. Certainly the lobby has lost much of its mystique under New Labour. Though the televising of its proceedings continues to be rejected on the grounds that this would give too much publicity to the Prime Minister's Official Spokesman, briefings are now carried out on an on-the-record basis and since March this year a summary has been made available on a government web site.

Selective briefings of political correspondents from favoured newspapers and the cultivation of the 'contextualising voices' of the political editors of British television (McNair 2000: 73) have contributed to, and are a part of, the downgrading of the collective lobby briefing system as government seeks to target the placing of information where it considers it can be most helpful for its purposes. At the same time, 'every Lobby journalist develops sources against which he can test material from the centre' (Roth 1999: 24). This does not mean that journalists actively seek out a large variety of alternative sources, evidence for which seems weak (Negrine 1996: 27). However, it does suggest that they routinely access other elite actors, both within and outside government. Information gathered from even a

fairly narrow range of non-governmental (and dissenting governmental) sources can severely destabilise a government's attempts at news management.

The example of the Major premiership illustrates the extent to which a government can fail to act as an effective primary definer for the media. In part this was the result of poor organisation and a lack of a strategic approach to government communication. Major's three successive press officers came from the civil service and none had a professional journalistic background. Gus O'Donnell, the first of the three, was primarily an economist, 'who became a press secretary only by accident' and 'never entirely settled into the press mould' (Seldon 1997: 144). Moreover, none of them enjoyed high status within the government apparatus. They were certainly not given a position of equality with (or even superiority to) government ministers, a status enjoyed by Ingham under Thatcher and Campbell under Blair. Nor were they given effective control over the media activities of the Conservative party (as opposed to the government). This led to difficulties in liaison between the Downing Street press office and Conservative party headquarters (Jones 1995: 96). Under Major there was also also a lack of central control over information coming out of government departments (Jones 1995: 93, 95).

As well as the strategic and organisational deficiencies in the government's approach to communications, the Major premiership was unable to mobilise the structural resources of authority and legitimacy in managing the news media. The events of Black Wednesday in September 1992, when the pound was forced out of the Exchange Rate Mechanism, blew apart the government's reputation for economic competence. Britain's role in Europe exposed faultlines within the government and party. Various media gave ministerial and party critics of Major's policies and leadership style a platform for their views. These included party dissidents who were able to exploit those sections of the press which were Eurosceptic and take advantage of the government's small and eroding parliamentary majority to increase their political importance and media profile. The resultant coverage presented a picture of a Prime Minister who was clearly unable to impose his leadership and authority over either the Conservative party or the government (Jones 1995: 91-121; 189-219). In addition, the immensely damaging coverage of sleaze, sexual scandal and financial impropriety which dogged the second half of the Major premiership did not just bring into ridicule the moralistic back-to-basics campaign launched by the Prime Minister in early 1994. By presenting an image of an accident-prone Prime Minister and government at the mercy of events rather than controlling them, the coverage further damaged the Prime Minister's already weakened authority.

New Labour and political journalism: managing the interdependence

The New Labour government is not only the most media-oriented executive ever seen in British politics, but also benefits from its structural position as a key official source in the

network of political communications. Yet in spite of these attributes, New Labour has encountered a variety of difficulties in the management of its interdependent relationship with political journalists in its attempts to structure the media's news agenda. In-fighting between governmental spin doctors has at times undermined the presentational coherence of the government's message. The skilful use of new alternative power centres by both Labour and non-Labour politicians who themselves have become more professional in their public relations activities has at times put the government on the communications defensive. Finally, journalists have sometimes used their relative autonomy to expose political failings and act as a channel of public concern on important issues, resulting in coverage critical of New Labour.

(a) When spin doctors fall out

The veneer of unity which largely characterised the public face of New Labour in opposition became cracked when subjected to the stresses and strains of government. Of course, the presence of tensions and conflict within government is itself nothing new. During the Thatcher premiership there were significant divisions between ministers on the issue of state intervention in economic management, while under Major the European issue was a continual source of interministerial discord. Both were running media stories during the respective premierships, with the difference being that while Thatcher was usually presented as driving through reform and overcoming opposition from within the Cabinet (at least until her last months in office), Major was presented as being debilitated by divisions in his government for much of his premiership.

In Blair's New Labour government the main faultline has been less about ideology or policy, more about personality and presentation. The exposure in the public sphere of conflict at the heart of the New Labour government betrayed a contradiction between theory and practice in New Labour's approach to political communications. While unity was perceived as an essential element in the government's construction and maintenance of its media image, leading New Labour spin doctors were settling inter-personal scores via their favoured journalists in the media.

The most notable example in this regard was the conflict which eventually saw the removal from their respective positions of Peter Mandelson, a leading adviser on media presentation in the Blair government who had recently been given a Cabinet post, and Charlie Whelan, special adviser in charge of media relations for the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Gordon Brown. The conflict between these two 'spin doctors' had its origins in the Labour party leadership contest of 1994, in which initially Brown had sought to put forward his own candidacy and had thought - wrongly as it turned out - that he could count on Mandelson's support. Mandelson's perceived treachery in supporting Blair had led to a certain froideur between Brown and Mandelson ever since.

In the first year and a half of the New Labour government Brown's press secretary, Charlie Whelan, acted as a maverick in his relations with political journalists, escaping the command and control organisation imposed by Mandelson and Campbell on other government ministries. Whelan's briefings to the media were used to boost the popularity of his boss, with Brown consistently refusing to rein him in, despite obvious Downing Street irritation. To the Blair camp the problem with Whelan was that he seemed to be operating to his own agenda (and that of his ministerial boss) rather than to the collective agenda of the government. Yet for a long while he was protected by Brown who presumably was not unhappy to see his special adviser briefing journalists on his behalf rather than for the government as a whole. What was being played out here was not so much a substantive power struggle between Prime Minister and Chancellor as a symbolic enactment in the public sphere of the leadership contest which had in the end not taken place a few years earlier.

The fractious relationship between Whelan and the Prime Minister's Office included a media story in January 1998 sourced from Number 10 that Brown had 'psychological flaws' which were increasingly irritating the Prime Minister. While the relationship between Blair and Brown seemed to recover, the in-fighting between 'spin doctors' remained a feature of the New Labour government throughout 1998. This culminated in a mutual letting of blood in 1998-99. From the Blair side Mandelson had to resign over media revelations of financial impropriety. This was followed shortly by the enforced departure of Whelan who was suspected by the Blair camp of having leaked the news about Mandelson's financial dealings to a sympathetic journalist. Political journalists had a field day in their news coverage of and commentary on the governmental fall-out.

The Mandelson-Whelan saga provided three important lessons for an understanding of New Labour's interdependence with political journalists. First, and most obviously, it demonstrated that the public appearance of government division is itself a major news story. This is especially the case when leading figures in the government are involved. Second, it showed how spin doctors were active participants in the process of fomenting discord through leaks and briefings to favoured journalists. Governmental division was not a phenomenon merely observed by political journalists, nor did it emerge as the result of painstaking investigative journalism. Rather the public face of division was presented to journalists on a plate by ministerial advisers and spin doctors working to their own personal and ministerial agendas. Third, the saga revealed the dangers of high profile spinning for its practitioners. When the spin doctor becomes the story, then media coverage will focus on the public relations aspects of governmental activity, much of which the government would prefer to remain out of the public eye.

(b) A political counter dynamic to the command and control culture

It is important to remember the political dominance of central government exercised by New Labour since 1997. The government is led by a Prime Minister with a highly presidentialist leadership style who has enjoyed huge levels of personal support in opinion polls for much of his term of office. It has a massive and largely compliant parliamentary majority and does not require the support of any coalition partner. Finally, it is faced with a numerically weak parliamentary opposition headed by an uncharismatic leader, William Hague, who has failed to make any impact with the media or public opinion as a possible alternative Prime Minister.

The command and control culture of New Labour has been relatively successful in minimising dissent within the parliamentary party with the result that public expressions of opposition by New Labour MPs to government policy, especially in parliamentary votes, have been few (though there have been parliamentary rebellions on the issues of welfare reform and the removal of the automatic right of some defendants to trial by jury). However, alternative power centres to the Whitehall-Westminster axis have come to the fore in British politics in recent years as the power of the state has been 'hollowed out'. These new power centres include the institutions of the European Union, semi-independent regulatory authorities, the courts, the House of Lords, the devolved assemblies in Scotland and Wales and the mayorship of London.

Ironically, the Blair government's programme of constitutional change has increased the number and influence of alternative power centres, potentially challenging the command and control approach to political communications fostered by the executive. The government's hope and intention was that the devolved institutions in Scotland, Wales and London, all directly elected by their respective constituencies, would be dominated by New Labour supporters and so pose minimal substantive challenge to the Blairite political agenda. This has not proved to be the case.

First, New Labour does not have a single party majority in either the Scottish Parliament, where it dominates a coalition executive with the Liberal Democrats, or the Welsh Assembly, where it exercises power as a minority administration. Second, in Wales the parachuted Blairite candidate for the post of First Secretary, Alun Michael, was forced to resign at the beginning of 2000 in the face of a motion of no confidence proposed by the other parties of the Assembly. It was even reported that Michael could not count on the support of all the Labour members of the Assembly. His replacement, Rhodri Morgan, is not a Blairite and his election has been widely presented by political journalists as a victory for the Welsh Labour party over the centralising tendencies of Labour party headquarters in London. Third, while in Scotland Blair did succeed in having a supporter, Donald Dewar, elected as First Minister, the establishment of the Scottish Parliament in 1999 has been succeeded by widespread critical media coverage in Scotland of the executive's performance on issues such as the cost of the proposed new Parliament building, university tuition fees and the repeal of section 28 of the Local Government Act which forbids the promotion of homosexuality in school education.

Finally, Blair was unable to control the selection process for the New Labour candidate for the mayoralship of London. While the Blair-backed candidate, Frank Dobson, won the vote in New Labour's electoral college, the process itself was widely presented in the media as flawed. The announcement at the start of March 2000 that Ken Livingstone intended to run as an Independent candidate represented the biggest attack on command and control political communications so far. Blair has spoken out against Livingstone on several occasions, yet Livingstone remains well ahead of the official New Labour candidate in opinion polls. Livingstone is an extremely able self-publicist and though lacking the organisational resources of the New Labour machine he has succeeded in gaining coverage, much of it supportive, in national and metropolitan media.

The creation of alternative power centres has weakened the New Labour government's definitional control over the news media agenda. First, at the individual level it has helped focus journalistic attention on politicians within Labour (such as Livingstone and Morgan) who are not part of the Blairite camp. Second, it has provided a range of political actors, including nationalist parties, with an institutional platform from which to transmit their counter-definitional messages to the media. Third, in the case of the London mayoral election, it has allowed internal party conflict to spill out into the public sphere in a manner damaging to the government.

Meanwhile the spread of the promotional culture among political actors has led to the growing involvement of non-governmental elite sources in the definitional process of media agenda construction. It is not just the major political parties who have placed more emphasis on their communication activities. Parliamentary select committees, single issue pressure groups and professional bodies among others have established themselves as routine sources for journalists because of their acknowledged expertise on an issue, for example the media input of hospital consultants and Health Service Trust managers on the question of NHS funding. Often they have become highly professional in their approach to public relations, as shown by the case of the environmental pressure group Greenpeace. If they are well organised, adequately resourced and media friendly in their operations, then these non-governmental elite sources can provide their own information subsidies to journalists.

The significance of their contribution is enhanced where the media have organised themselves in such a way as to facilitate their role as source, notably through the existence of specialist correspondents in the field. On an issue like genetically modified crops, for example, pressure groups have played an important role in framing the issue for media coverage, providing specialist journalists with technical information in the public relations battle against the pro-GM elements in the biotechnology scientific community. In so doing, they have been able to tap into public anxiety about the safety of these crops for individual health and the environment which, in part at least, is a legacy from previous food scare stories (on 'mad cow' disease, salmonella in eggs and e-coli) in the British media.

(c) Journalistic autonomy

The framing and counter-framing agenda structuring operations of elite sources necessarily involve political journalists in an active process of selection, interpretation, evaluation and reconstruction of the information presented them. In the interdependent relationship between government as official source and political journalists the latter are not powerless in the definitional process. Referring to the work of Ericson, Baranek and Chan (1989), Negrine comments that while the information subsidy provided by the source 'lubricates the supply of, and demand for, information ... it cannot guarantee that the information will be processed as desired by the source' (Negrine 1996: 28). Rather like the audience's relationship with media messages in Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model (Hall 1992), in the management of their interdependence with political actors as sources, journalists may accept, negotiate with or reject the proffered spin.

In practice, the exercise of journalistic autonomy is influenced both by certain structural and operational features of media institutions and by the shared cultural values of political journalists as a profession.

There is now an unprecedented amount of mediatised political information available to audiences, without taking account of the growing amount of political material available on the Internet. While general information newspapers may be in slow but inexorable decline, the broadcasting and electronic media are growing as a result of technological change, notably digitalisation, combined with a more liberal regulatory environment. This expansion in media outlets has resulted in an increase in political coverage, both through news and current affairs programmes on generalist channels and via dedicated rolling news channels such as Sky News and BBC News 24.

Some media outlets, however, are not at all interested in politics, such as thematic channels given over wholly to films or sport. Moreover, not all sections of the audience necessarily welcome an expansion in the supply of available political information. The growth in media outlets encourages the fragmentation of the audience, allowing the uninterested to escape from exposure to political output just as much as it permits the addicted to indulge in regular fixes. In short, the output of political journalists has to compete for space and attention in a market prone to information and entertainment saturation.

The media in Britain are characterised by strong competition both between and within different sectors. In broadcasting, for example, the opening up of the market to new players has been accompanied by competition between digital platforms for subscribers (Sky versus ONdigital) and between television channels for advertisers (ITV, Channel Four and Channel 5). The comfortable BBC/ITV duopoly, each with its assured and separate source of funding, belongs to a distant age of restricted supply. Even public service broadcasters have now become more attuned to the needs of the market to retain their legitimacy and maintain a case for public funding. The different market segments of the national newspaper industry

are also highly competitive. As the media generally have become more commercially oriented business operations, aware of the need to attract audiences and advertisers in a crowded market, the importance of an identifiable brand image has increased. For television channels, for example, a reputation for quality news coverage is a major asset in the battle for viewers and subscribers.

Press partisanship and broadcasting regulation are two important defining features of the media in Britain, providing the context for the production of most political journalism. Underpinned by the principle of the 'free press', newspapers are largely unregulated and self-regulating. Meanwhile broadcasting, reflecting its traditional adherence to public service values, remains heavily regulated by statutory authorities to preserve due balance and impartiality in news coverage. This means that newspapers can adopt a partisan approach to political coverage, for example functioning as a source of and conduit for opposition to government. In contrast, while broadcasting can act as a forum for debate and a site for contestation, broadcast political coverage cannot adopt an overt editorial line.

With regard to newspaper partisanship, as far as New Labour is concerned, some newspapers are natural supporters (eg The Mirror Group titles) and some natural opponents (eg The Telegraph group titles). Four points can be made about newspaper partisanship in this context. First, as we have seen in the case of New Labour in the 1990s, the structural configuration of newspaper partisanship is not set in stone, but can change. Proprietors and editors (rather than journalists) are the key actors in deciding on the partisanship of their newspapers.

Second, newspaper partisanship influences but does not determine the nature or tone of journalistic coverage on a day-to-day basis. Sympathetic newspapers may adopt a hostile attitude in their coverage on certain issues and at certain times in the political cycle, without necessarily calling into question their structural partisanship. Brian MacArthur, a media correspondent on *The Times*, pointed to evidence of journalists turning on the spin doctors of New Labour at the start of 2000. 'What has been surprising as Blair marked his first thousand days has been *the criticism from the papers that are sympathetic to him.*' (MacArthur 2000, my emphasis) To cite just one recent example, in its editorial of March 7 2000 the pro-New Labour Mirror was scathing in its criticism of the party's handling of the process of selection of its mayoral candidate for London.

Third, newspaper coverage, especially in the elite segment of the market, may incorporate different political viewpoints. For example, one political journalist has argued that with regard to coverage of New Labour this has been the case at *The Times* where 'readers of the top people's paper were presented with a schizophrenic menu. The political news pages endeavoured to place the best possible construction on government policy, while on the comment pages Gove, Kaletsky, Rees-Mogg, Parris and others ... were all capable of placing the worst' (Osborne 199: 175).

Finally, this type of ambivalence is itself symptomatic of the conditional nature of partisanship in the case of some newspapers. This particularly applies in the case of the newspapers of Murdoch's News International group. Murdoch is known to be opposed to Britain having stronger links within the European Union and to British membership of the single European currency. The conditional support of *The Sun* for New Labour since 1997, and especially for Blair, cannot be compared with the unconditional support the same newspaper gave the Conservative government, and particularly Mrs. Thatcher, during the 1980s. On the European issue, New Labour has to tread warily and knows that it has to do so if it is not to lose Murdoch's support. In its relationship with the Murdoch press, therefore, New Labour cannot assume or command support. Rather it has to bargain for it, careful not to alienate Murdoch's newspapers if it can avoid it (though there may come a time when political and economic pressures push New Labour into a situation of conflict with the Murdoch press over Europe).

In contrast to the overt partisanship of the press, the political coverage of broadcasting has traditionally been highly regulated on public service lines. Here the norms of impartiality and balance, imposed on public service broadcasters and to a large extent accepted by other broadcasting outlets, have conditioned the work of journalists. The application of public service norms have sometimes been criticised for imposing an artificial adversarial dualism on broadcast political coverage and for operating within the context of a narrow spread of ideological opinion. However, these norms can sometimes provide the basis for alternative and critical discourses to the official governmental perspective on events and issues (Schlesinger et al 1983). Governments can create a climate in which critical coverage is discouraged by bullying and intimidating broadcasters, as happened with the BBC and, on one famous occasion, ITV during the Thatcher premiership. Though heavy-handed, such governmental intervention was intended to send a signal to broadcasters, punishing them for their 'disloyalty'. Since 1997 the New Labour government has gone public on more than one occasion in criticising the political coverage of the BBC, especially its elite radio programmes (*Today*, *The World at One*). One of its favourite means of refusing to engage with broadcasting journalists is to decline to provide a spokesperson for interview. This empty chair strategy both conveys governmental displeasure and deprives the programme of an important input of information and ministerial comment.

Within this media environment, the cultural values of political journalists as a profession are an important variable in influencing the content and tone of news coverage. Of course, political journalists do not constitute a homogeneous group. Rather they fulfil different functions (reporter, specialist correspondent, columnist) within their respective media (press, radio, television). The different journalistic functions allow more (or less) freedom of manoeuvre in composing a story. For example, political columnists provide commentary on events and interpretation of issues from a subjective and individualistic standpoint. Newspaper columnists in particular are less restricted than other political journalists by

hierarchical control or institutional constraints. This allows them to engage in a more personalised and opinionated form of political journalism than many of their colleagues.

Notwithstanding these differences in journalistic function and medium of dissemination, however, some aspects of professional cultural commonality tend to bind political journalists together.

The first is, that in the selection and construction of material for their stories, political journalists are driven by their interpretation of news values as to what makes a 'good story'. Political scandal and impropriety are natural topics in this regard. Some of the toughest reactive news management tests for the New Labour government have been in this area, including the Ecclestone affair on Labour party funding, the Ron Davies scandal and allegations of financial impropriety against government ministers Geoffrey Robinson and Peter Mandelson. Stories about internal splits, dissension and division are also regarded as 'good stories'. As one leading political editor, Michael White of *The Guardian*, argued,

I sometimes get a fear that it is impossible to have a civilised and reasonable debate about, let us say, the merits of the Euro within a political party ... because people like us cry 'Split'. The reason we cry split is because it is one way of getting things into print in an adversarial media culture. The word 'split' will get you into a newspaper more quickly than the words 'total agreement', so it tends to feed a slightly vicious circle there which accentuates even mild disagreement between colleagues.

(House of Commons Select Committee on Public Administration 1998: 19)

On this view, the competitive drive in the media to attract audiences pushes news coverage of elite political actors in the direction of focusing on internal disagreements. This encourages the government to intensify its command and control approach, since the journalistic imperative for a 'good story' conflicts with the governmental logic for favourable publicity. The journalistic imperative pushes the government into one more turn of the ratchet of spin, while journalists respond by pushing further in their search for a good news story.

Second, political journalists have an ambivalent attitude towards the spinning activities of government. This is because to some extent journalists rely on spin and may even admire the sheer professionalism of the public relations activities of government as source. However, political journalists also need to emphasise their independence from government as part of their own legitimation as a profession in the eyes of the audience (McNair 2000: 136). One way of doing this is by unmasking the spin. Thus, as part of the increased coverage of political process as opposed to policy, government news media management activities have themselves become an integral part of the media's coverage of politics as journalists unpack the government's packaging for their audiences. This has included most famously coverage of the very public briefing of journalists by Charlie Whelan from a mobile phone outside a pub in Whitehall on the government's policy on European Monetary Union. More generally, the alleged misrepresentation of governmental policy initiatives by the government's spin doctors

to extract maximum partisan advantage has become the hook on which to hang stories on a range of policy issues from health to industrial policy.

Third, on some issues political journalists take upon themselves the mantle of advocates of public concern, holding the government (and relevant official bodies) to account. During period of the New Labour government such an approach was noticeable in media coverage of the authorities' response to the Paddington rail disaster, when the issue of rail safety dominated the news agenda for several days and many sections of the media articulated the high levels of public anxiety on this issue. Health has been another issue where much media coverage has reflected public disquiet, highlighted by the successive winter flu 'crises' which have stretched the resources of the NHS to breaking point. Critical media coverage may have played a part in the Prime Minister's pledge, later revised downwards to an aspiration, made during a live television interview to bring up Britain's spending on health to European levels. Finally, on the very sensitive issue of asylum seekers, coverage in some tabloid newspapers has helped fuel a political controversy, feeding readers with 'moral panic' stories about aggressive begging and arguably contributing to the hardening policy response of the New Labour government.

This takes us a long way from the original portrayal of political journalists as compliant accomplices in the public relations news management strategies of government. In contrast, on this revised view, political journalists have the power to expose politicians, play up disagreements, demystify the political process and influence the agenda of public policy-making. Even the professional spin doctors of New Labour have been driven to express their exasperation at their failure to shape news coverage and to criticise the power of journalists to articulate their own message. In just one week in early March 2000, for example, the Prime Minister's official spokesman, Alastair Campbell, berated journalists over their coverage of the genetically modified food issue for 'putting their own spin on the prime minister's words in pursuit of their own agendas'; criticised the coverage of the National Health Service issue by the London *Evening Standard* as 'exactly the kind of exaggerated, wilful misinterpretation that dogs not just health, but so many other serious policy issues'; wrote to the BBC to complain that a current affairs programme on the London mayoral election was nothing less than a 'poisonous piece of propaganda'; and argued that while it was once media fashion to be hugely pro-Blair, 'the current fashion is broadly to dump on him' (Ellis 2000).

These protestations of government helplessness might well themselves be part of government spin. After all, it is in the government's interest to shape the news agenda without being seen to do so. They are certainly part of the ritual of exchange between government and media when the former is going through a bad news trough. However, in all likelihood they also reflect genuine exasperation on the part of government when journalists exercise their relative autonomy and the resultant media coverage is rather different from what the government would like.

Conclusion

In the process of structuring the media's news agenda the government, even under New Labour, is not as powerful nor journalists as powerless as Cockerell et al and Jones would have us believe. The relationship between these two sets of political communication actors is not most accurately portrayed in terms of the domination of one and the subordination of the other. Rather their mutual interdependence also incorporates elements of bargaining (as resources are exchanged) and adversarial conflict (as sections of the media act as a mouthpiece for criticism of, and opposition to, government).

Is this mutually dependent relationship between government and political journalists spinning out of control? From the perspective of the government, public relations and news management strategies constitute a rational approach to political communications in an era of saturation coverage of politics. Provided it does not exercise excessive power in the communications marketplace, there is nothing inherently undesirable in a government wishing to have its message transmitted in as beneficial a form as possible. Since governments wish to secure competitive advantage from their political communications, it would be naive to expect government just to provide 'neutral' information to be processed by professional journalists. On this view, spin is an integral component of elite political behaviour in the media age.

Political journalists have learnt to live with this state of affairs, perhaps just as well since they are themselves implicated in its development. Spin can be functional to their work, helping them make sense of a story in an era of information overload and rolling deadlines. Frequently the political spin is revealed to audiences for what it is, an act which reinforces the professional legitimacy of the journalists. On occasions, it can even backfire on the spin doctors. On this view, as New Labour has discovered, the power of spin in helping the government shape the news agenda is not untrammelled.

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Tunstall

Finally, during the 1990s there was a significant change in the political partisanship of Britain's national newspapers. At every postwar general election up to and including 1992 a majority of national newspapers as measured by circulation figures were pro-Conservative. Particularly following the switch of *The Sun* to supporting the Conservatives in 1974, there was a huge imbalance between editorial opinion and voter preferences. By 1987 'the Conservative Party had the support of 72 per cent of national daily circulation but only 43 per cent of the vote'

(Curran and Seaton 1991: 124), while in the 1992 contest the figures were 64% and 42% respectively (Seymour-Ure 1996: 219). Moreover, as throughout the Thatcher premiership (1979-90) the majority of national newspapers were strongly supportive of the government's policy mix of economic neo-liberalism and authoritarian populism, the *intensity* of partisanship became a more notable feature of newspaper coverage during this period, especially among the tabloids (Seymour-Ure 1992: 52).

Empty chair policy Ministers declining to appear on programmes to answer questions, Blair's stories in newspapers, etc. The success of this can be judged by the number of articles which appeared in News International newspapers under Tony Blair's byline.

The practice of unofficial briefing of journalists and leaks to the media by ministers and their advisers may reveal the intensity of the division at the heart of the governmental apparatus. These and similar divisions are frequently apparent to the media and reported by them. This can often lead to embarrassment for state authorities as disunity is exposed and dissension fought out under the glare of the media's spotlights. Moreover, as well as political and policy conflicts at the heart of the state, there are also inequalities of media access. The Prime Minister routinely commands most attention at the apex of the news hierarchy, while other figures may have to compete to secure their case a media hearing.

The second weakness in applying the concept of primary definition to the state is that it fails to take account of the possibility of negotiation over issue definition by state and non-state actors *prior to* interaction with the media. Some groups achieve 'insider' status with government departments, influencing policy formulation. 'Such status allows a group to act as an expert ... source for MPs in the modification of legislation and also might require a government department [in this case the Home Office] to develop its own media strategy to counter possible lines of attack' (Schlesinger and Tumber 1994, p.62).

Critical and investigative journalism is one way in which the media may scrutinize the state's attempted primary definition. For example, on the poll tax issue 'the media exerted a highly significant influence on the debate: in amplifying particular issues and ignoring others; in pressurizing certain political sources on occasions and allowing others to escape with the scantest scrutiny' (Deacon and Golding 1994, p.202).

During the troubles in Northern Ireland some newspapers have stood out against the official perspective on occasions.

Moreover, as Schlesinger and Tumber argue, there are variations within and between different news media which allow access to alternative perspectives (p.20). In television this

is especially true of programme genres outside of news such as current affairs, documentaries and drama output (Schlesinger, Murdock and Elliott 1983). For instance, television current affairs programmes on the imprisonment of the Guildford Four and the Birmingham Six questioned the safety of the original convictions and contributed to the process which ended in the release of the defendants, much to the embarrassment of government ministers and members of the judiciary.

In addition, Miller contends that while the primary definition model assumes that there is a simple coincidence between journalistic routines, 'news values' and the interests of the state, this can be an unwarranted assumption. For instance, the operationalization of news values tends to make violence the main rationale for reporting events in Northern Ireland. Yet, media coverage of violence does not always serve the interests of the state which at times wants to portray the 'other side' of life in Northern Ireland and to downplay the impact of terrorism so as to promote inward economic investment in the province (Miller 1993, pp.395-397).

Finally, it is important to remember that in seeking to manage the news the state is interested less in controlling information than in controlling public opinion. The effectiveness of the state's primary definition role can be assessed more by the extent to which the audience believes the message than the degree to which that message is framed in accordance with the interests of the state. Sometimes the audience may be sympathetic to the message. For example, in the Northern Ireland conflict the official perspective which condemns the use of violence for political ends strikes a chord with the prevalent norms in British society. Terrorist acts committed in Northern Ireland may have long since desensitized the British public to violence, unless the numbers killed were large as in the 1987 Enniskillen bombing. However, similar acts carried out in mainland Britain, such as the 1993 Warrington blast and the 1996 Canary Wharf bomb, were more commonly viewed with outrage. Whipped up by a partisan tabloid press and emotionally influenced by television pictures of the results of violence, which were frequently accompanied by interviews with victims or their grieving relatives, much of the audience has tended to internalize and reproduce the official perspective on terrorism, often with a more populist tinge. Perspectives on terrorism which challenged the official view were faced, therefore, with a double problem of encoding *and* decoding: first, to gain media coverage and secondly, to find a resonance with an audience accustomed to the official perspective.

However, audience support for the official perspective or stoicism in the face of alternative viewpoints cannot be taken for granted. In particular, if the message runs counter to the audience's personal experience, then no amount of favourable media coverage is likely to be effective. For example, the government's argument, backed by selective use of statistics, that the quality of care provided by the National Health Service is improving will have little persuasive impact with those members of the audience (and their friends and relatives) who are on a long waiting list for an appointment with a consultant. If government ministers and state officials are regarded as untrustworthy, control of public opinion becomes impossible.

No amount of primary definition of the mad cow disease issue would have persuaded the public that British beef was safe. The state's huge information resources and political authority do not make up for a lack of credibility.

'My view was that the course adopted by the Prime Minister and the press secretary [O'Donnell] had been flawed from the start. On the one hand they were trying to open up their relationship with the news media. More information was being supplied on the record and there was also greater access to Major. But at the same time they were expecting journalists to consider themselves honour-bound not to divulge what they discovered socially or in casual conversation. Their initial approach was both admirable and honourable, but it failed to take account of the growing intrusiveness of the media. Competition among the national newspapers had become ever more deadly and the clubby rules and regulations of the lobby could not withstand the constant pressures and insatiable appetite of television and radio.' (Jones 1995, pp.107-8)

off-the-record blunders (eg Bastardgate, Jones p.108)

control of parliamentary majority (though backbench revolt on trial by jury) has been subverted in two ways. House of Lords rebellions (trial by jury; repeal of Section 28) and critical reports of House of Commons select committees (criticisms of transport select committee regarding proposed air traffic control privatisation)

opposition (eg on asylum issue). But this has not been a strong source for media coverage.

There is clearly no simple answer to this question. A full analysis would have to consider a range of media sectors and outlets over the full period of the New Labour government, evaluating to what extent coverage was consonant with the wishes and desires of the government's political communication experts and to what extent the nature of the journalistic coverage changed over time. Such an analysis goes well beyond the scope of this paper.

The behaviour of political actors in this regard has spawned a new vocabulary in which 'spin doctors' use 'photo opportunities' to present the leaders in favourable settings where they can provide a few words of short, punchy quotable text - 'sound bites' - to support the pictures and provide good copy for journalists (Jones 1995).

The formal lobby briefings of political journalists by the Prime Minister's Chief Press Secretary are the most obvious institutional mechanism for the implementation of a proactive media strategy. These briefings are held on the record and a summary is now available on the

official government website. However, televising the briefings has been resisted on the grounds that it might give the Prime Minister's Official Spokesman too high a public profile. In addition, New Labour has tried to curry favour with specific news media and certain political journalists, offering them privileged access in return for sympathetic coverage (reference?).

audiovisual and electronic v print media, agenda setting importance of press v broadcasting has become the public's single most important source of political information (Negrine 1994: 1-2). Equally significantly, television is the medium in which the public have the most confidence as a trustworthy source of political information, coming well ahead of newspapers.

Yet not only are there important differences between media outlets in terms of partisanship, regulation and market positioning, but within the same medium there are different genres of political coverage (reportage, interviews and commentary in the press; news, current affairs, and documentary programming in broadcasting).

More educated profession Investigative journalism Editorial turnover Ownership turnover of newspapers Low trust rating in opinion surveys (along with politicians) Editorials Women journalists NUJ in retreat (see Tunstall book)

Two possible modes of interdependence in the power relationship between government and media, both of which emphasise the subordination of political journalism to governmental media management, can be rejected as inappropriate explanatory models. The first might be termed the victim model. According to this view, political journalists are the victims of political spin and media manipulation, powerless to counter the news management strategies of government. With superior resources and organisation, government holds the upper hand in its dealings with journalists, who are largely dependent on government for information. Political journalists are powerless to resist the superior forces of the governmental information machine.

The second mode of interdependence is the transmission belt model. Here the media are presented not so much as victims, but as willing subordinates and active accomplices in governmental news management. Either natural supporters of government policy, intellectually persuaded by ideological argument or quite simply bought off by decisions which are in their organisational interest, media outlets may behave as active accomplices to the government's news management initiatives. (Cockerell, Walker and Hennessy40).

In so doing, journalists are influenced by their own personal preferences and prejudices, the partisan allegiances and institutional norms of their media organisations, their sense of news values, the generalist or specialist nature of their journalistic role and the form of journalism (reportage or commentary) in which they are involved. In addition, differences between media

sectors (press, radio, television), the market segmentation within them (elite, mid-market, popular), the extent and intensity of competition between media and the degree of regulation to which the sectors are subject (the self-regulating free press versus statutorily regulated broadcasting) also influence the operational environment in which political journalists function.

Fifth, technological change means that news is now produced and disseminated faster than ever before. Technology has reduced the time gap between an event happening in the real world and its coverage by the media. This means that political reporters and correspondents have less time to stand back from events, explain them to audiences and analyse their significance. The expansion in news broadcasts also means that some political correspondents have to spend a considerable amount of time actually appearing on news programmes, which further reduces the time available for checking stories and exploring different angles.

There is evidence that in recent months coverage has become more critical of government policy and that as a result the government has become discontented about that coverage. On a raft of issues the government's ability to define an issue and command its primary interpretation by the media has been open to question. Since the start of the new millennium such issues have included:

- the controversy over genetically modified foods and the alleged u-turn by the Prime Minister on this issue
- the issue of political asylum, highlighted by the incident of the Afghan hijacking but a longer running news story than just this particular event
- the General Pinochet extradition
- the suspension of the devolved institutions in Northern Ireland and the reimposition of direct rule from Westminster
- the ongoing underfunding crisis in the National Health Service, highlighted by the winter flu crisis
- the Millennium dome
- government proposals for the privatisation of air traffic control
- the repeal of Section 28 of the Local Government Act which prevents the promotion of the acceptability of homosexuality in school education
- rail safety in the wake of the Paddington rail disaster in October 1999 and the publication of official reports into previous rail crashes
- the resignation of the First Minister in the Welsh Assembly, Alun Michael
- the continuing and rumbling issue of Europe in general and Britain's membership of the Euro in particular
- the selection of the official Labour candidate for the post of London mayor
- the British government's contribution to the Mozambique relief operation

- the issue of removing the right to trial by jury for defendants charged with certain offences

government drop in popularity in opinion polls and so media following public opinion (as well as helping to create it). . . of just putting the boot in (eg the Dome)issue attention cycle (the Dome)media as surrogate opposition.

Public served by political journalism? Professional norms and values? Ethics, social responsibility, fourth estate, acting on behalf of voters.

Why original quotes and why were they wrong? the Interdependence between government and political journalism is characterised by diversity, complexity and fluid. change and mutual adjustment. Rather they are active participants in the process of news management (the selection and construction of reality). Sometimes cooperative. Sometimes in conflict. Sometimes moving along the spectrum of possible responses and inter-relationships. Adversarial model?

Not dominant thesis; but narrow range of official sources; but expanding range of sources; investigative journalism not strong, but exposure journalism is; journalists coverage driven by media as well as political logic; role of public?

One possible future consequence of the use of such campaign devices is that party leaderships will be able to communicate more directly with voters without needing to go through the professional gatekeepers of the news media organisations. It may be that the filtering and gatekeeping functions which have traditionally been performed on behalf of the audience by traditional media professionals such as journalists and news editors will decline as party information is delivered directly to audiences in their households.

may have become too critical, too adversarial and, indeed, too powerful as agenda-setting actors in the political communications process.

Conclusion

Three key points emerge from the above analysis.

First, a model of the state-media relationship couched solely in terms of state controls and pressure on the one hand and media resistance on the other is not satisfactory. The state and the media are not two separate entities, but rather interlinked in various respects. For example, the state's power of appointment to key posts in broadcasting, such as the chairman of

the BBC board of governors, can be used to send a disciplinary signal to the broadcasters. The viewpoint of the state can then be diffused through the managerial hierarchy of the organization, helping to create a climate in which decisions about news and current affairs are made. This cultural impact on the corporate norms of the organization can be reinforced by a referral upward system of decision making in which controversial issues are passed up the hierarchy, ending up with the director general who owes his appointment to the board of governors. To some extent, therefore, state controls and pressure are internalized within media organizations, most notably in the case of the public service broadcasters.

Second, the pressure-resistance model is unsatisfactory because the media do not always need to be controlled. Frequently they choose to cooperate with the state. While the state wants to structure the media's news agenda in its own interests, the media need information from the state as part of the raw supply of their news output. In these circumstances the power relationship between state and media is not so much one based on control, but on mutual dependence.

Finally, in spite of all the state's formal and informal powers, it is not always successful in its attempts to structure the media's news agenda. The government, for example, may seek to exploit its relationship with the media for partisan political and ideological purposes. But it cannot impose its agenda at will. Managing the news can be a profitable enterprise if the resultant coverage is favourable, but it is also a hazardous task with no guarantee of success.

ABSTRACT

Section 1 on NL: spin, soundbites, control. Millbank culture and organisation ...

Brown still gets positive coverage for handling of the economy

But are the interests of citizens necessarily best served by this state of affairs? A better informed citizenry may be better able to see through the packaging of political communications and have more realistic expectations of the political process. If so, then talk of a crisis in public communication is misplaced. However, while a healthy scepticism on the part of citizens may be beneficial, cynicism is not. In Britain politicians and journalists regularly come near the bottom of surveys measuring levels of public trust in professional groups.

In the face of a public relations approach by government, the behaviour of political journalists, who themselves operate in a highly competitive environment, is also rational. Political journalists have to sell their product within their media institutions in competition with other journalistic output and programme genres and in competition with their competitors in other media outlets. Exposure journalism and adversarial journalism are part of this competition for survival.

What is the impact of these modes of interaction for the information of citizens? For some writers these developments have contributed to a crisis in public communication, characterised by increased coverage of presentation and process at the expense of issues and policy (Blumler and Gurevitch 1995). For others, however, the different modes of mutual interdependence between government and political journalism may be seen as creating a more mature and informed electorate and citizenry in an enhanced political public sphere (McNair 2000).

Both sides may be right. Citizens may be better informed than ever, but also more cynical about politics (McNair 2000: 50). Public relations politics and exposure/adversarial journalism may be contributing to that cynicism.