The Economy and the Limits of Political Interference: The Media in Britain

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Abstract

There is a well developed British literature on way in which public relation, political marketing and spin have become part of the fabric of mediated democracy. The analysis focuses predominately on the attempts of the politicians at Westminster to influence the media agenda, or on attempts to contrive policy pronouncements which will be reflected well in the press. However, these studies are rarely accompanied by a longitudinal assessment of news coverage, but instead rely on isolated cases. The following analysis will look at coverage of the domestic British economy, assessing those substantive and formal dimensions of its structure which show signs of either successful or unsuccessful political intervention. The conclusions will suggest that notions of excessive political influence on media agendas are exaggerated, and that the connection between spin, political coverage and mediated democracy needs to be re-thought.

The state we are in

McNair (2000a) notes a ‘pervasive pessimism’ about the media’s role in contemporary British democracy. There are various aspects to this pessimism. The media’s presentation of politics and social life is said to have become more raucous, insubstantial and ‘dumbed down’. The politicians, for their part, now need to respond to the demands of the media. They have done this in a number of ways, but three are thought to be the most significant. The political class has pandered to the media’s need for excitement, drama and celebrity (Meyer, 2002), and as a result politics has been personalised and ‘presidentialised’, with political coverage dumbed down and reduced to ‘infotainment’. In addition, the politicians have, it is argued, become oversensitive to the manner in which the media handle politics, and resort to framing their policies in reaction to media coverage, or in a manner which is designed to grab headlines. And finally, the politicians are engaged in a relentless battle to manage both their image and the way in which their activities and programmes are represented through the mass media – the province of political marketing, image management and ‘spin’ (Barnett and Gaber, 2001). The result, for some, has been the cheapening of politics generally, and the transmogrification of active citizens into passive consumers of what is a devalued form of political discourse (Franklin, 1994 and 1997). Commentators have noted with alarm that the public in Britain (as elsewhere) seem less keen to vote than they once were, and there is the suggestion that a combination of degraded political communication, and citizen cynicisms or disengagement, serve to compromise the authentic accountability that ought to be at the heart of a mature democracy. Democracy, from this perspective, is in trouble, and the connection between the voter’s wishes, opinions or preferences, and government policy is less
‘authentic’ than it once was or, indeed, could be. The problem with this pessimistic perspective is that a number of the premises which underpin the arguments are underexplored empirically, and as a result the generalisations they embody are contested, or at least contestable. A case in point is the issue of the ‘dumbing down’ of political coverage, where the notion that political coverage is necessarily degraded or all but absent, is contradicted by a considerable weight of evidence (Barnett, 1998; Barnett et al 2000; Winston, 2002; Gavin, forthcoming).

However, the primary focus of the analysis that follows will be on image management and ‘spin’. The literature here illustrates the achievements of political marketing under Margret Thatcher (Scammell, 1995; Kavanagh, 1995). Subsequently, there has been considerable interest in ‘spin’ under New Labour. However, it is ironic that a literature which points out that effective image management demands the effective monitoring media content, often glosses over what is actually printed or broadcast in response to, or as a result of, ‘spin’. Analysis can focus on definitional and conceptual clarification of what constitutes spin (Moloney et al 2003; Andrews, 2006), or on the description of its history (Maloney, 2001; Negrine, 2002), without dealing in any detail with ‘content’. Likewise, the more extended treatments of image management are heavy on anecdote and description, but thin on systematic or extended attention to the coverage spin is thought to influence (Jones, 2001). Even those who are sceptical of the power of image management (Heffernan, 2006) give scant attention to coverage, offering only the odd anecdote. There is a tendency to rely on high profile instances of attempts at spin, often fleshed out by rather thin descriptions of media reports (McNair, 2000b), and now accompanied by what is beginning to look like a mandatory reference to the Jo Moore affair on 9/11 (Kuhn, 2005). This limited attention to ‘content’ is also manifest in studies dealing with specific topics or events, such as education policy (Gewirtz et al 2004) or party conferences (Stanyer, 2001). Very few studies have combined the analysis of political marketing, the resultant news content and its impact (Norris et al 1999). But the particular study cited here deals with the rarefied atmosphere of elections, where journalists are perhaps most sensitive to ‘spin’, and therefore most likely to resist it (Marr, 2005; Paxman, 2005) or expose it (Esser et al 2000).

The lack of emphasis on systematic analysis of content is an important weakness in our understanding of the main processes which connect the principal players in the political firmament. Figure 1 illustrates, in a necessarily simplified and stripped down form, the
principle players and some of the processes which are thought to connect them. As one might expect in a representative democracy, there can be a connection between public preferences and government policies (‘D’). For instance, Hobolt and Klemmensens’s (2005) rather simplistic, mono-dimensional quantitative model of British and Danish politics suggests that changes in issue salience for the public (particularly on unemployment and the economy) pre-date policy changes, and they conclude that that government is, in fact, responsive to the people. But their study completely fails to engage in any way with other important factors. The connection (‘A’) between the mass media’s influence on public opinion and issue salience (McCombs, 2005) is completely unexplored, as is the government’s impact on media content (‘F’), or the government’s response to the actual or perceived influence of the media (‘E’), a weakness that is not entirely unknown in this particular research domain (Burstein, 2003).

In refreshing contrast to the highly abstracted quantitative approaches, observers of US politics (Herbst, 1998 and 2002) have noted how the media’s supposed re-expression of public opinion can influence how governments view their legislative output (‘E’). Key government actors believe that media coverage (‘A’) is either a faithful reflection of public opinion, or alternatively that it will eventually *influence* the voter – a form of ‘3rd person effect’ (Herbst, 2002, p.183). This may, in part, explain the strenuous efforts by governments, as well as organised interests (Davis, 2002), to manage the coverage they get (‘F’). In Britain, as in the US, such relationships are perhaps best addressed through archival, interview and biographical approaches, focused on the dramatis personae (Jacobs and Shapiro, 2002; Shapiro and Jacobs, 2002). However, this is not enough, since news content and its impact are, as we will see, an entirely different empirical prospect, demanding attention in their own right. The analysis which follows is primarily concerned with news content (i.e. actual coverage), and with its subsequent and identifiable impact on the public (‘A’). As already noted, the connection between news management, news content and its impact is woefully under-explored in the literature on spin. This is despite the fact that critical evaluations of the processes involved, as well as the pejorative terms often used to describe them, embody the unstated and often unexplored assumption that the news reports are actually corrupted and will, in turn, actively and effectively (mis)inform the audience. The focus will, therefore, be on news content and its impact. But the former should help – indirectly and via a natural experiment – illuminate the nature of the relationship between the government or organised
interests and the media (‘F’), while the latter will place the interrelationship between government and public (‘D’) in a clearer perspective.

One of the primary concerns in the analysis that follows is that a substantial longitudinal sweep of news is explored. The assessment of the political messages embedded in reports has, in the past, often been based on quite limited quantities of data (Emmison, 1983; Jensen, 1987; Rae and Drury, 1993; Warner and Molotch, 1993). As a result there is significant potential for a partial or even a distorted sense of what the news conveys to the public, to emerge. Moreover, the emphasis is on a medium that is considered, in Britain at least, to be the most important and most trust source of political information (Hargreaves and Thomas, 2002). This ‘lead medium’ should, then, be an important target for the dissemination of political messages or, least ways, be a place where the government and other interested parties would want to ensure effective damage limitation. The time frame for the exploration that follows is quite distant (1997 to late 2001), but it was chosen to reflect the period when the New Labour administration was thought to be at the height of its image management powers – at the time they were, after all, considered to be ‘the sultans of spin’ (Jones, 1999) and had clearly stolen the march on their Conservative revivals. For a number of reasons, the subject of ‘the economy’ – and ‘(un)employment’ in particular – is a useful site for a test of the government’s ability to manage or influence the agenda. In the period concerned, New Labour, most of all, was desperate to establish its economic credentials. The previous Labour government of 1974-79 had foundered on the rocks of economic dislocation, and as a result the Labour Party had carried a reputation for economic incompetence that the new Chancellor was desperate to shake. On top of this, the government’s ‘Welfare to Work’ employment programme was one of the leading element in a busy legislative programme. Finally, New Labour strategists were fully aware that governments are held responsible for the general trajectory of the economy, and that unsurprisingly its health (or otherwise) is, therefore, an important determinant of electoral support (Lewis-Beck and Palddam, 2000; Sanders, 2000; Sanders at al 2001). So failure in this strategic domain might well have seen the party ignominiously shunted back into what could have been another protracted spell in opposition. New Labour, then, needed to sustain sufficient popular momentum to gain itself an unprecedented second term in office. And success with the economy was an important part of this project.
From theory to evidence

The economy, from this perspective, mattered, and it mattered a lot. This makes the tenor of economic news in general – and employment news in particular – a significant test of New Labour’s ability to control or influence the agenda. Their degree of influence will be assessed indirectly, but through a number of strands of analysis. The first looks at the overall tenor of coverage of jobs in the context of what was, at the time, a protracted and almost unprecedented period of dropping unemployment. This is important because the coverage would give the public a sense of how the economy was performing, and how the government were handling the issue. The second looks at the ‘voices’ that were heard in the news - the people that were accessed and whose words were conveyed to the audience. The issue here is whether the government or, indeed, the corporate sector, were able to dominate the commentary in a way that forced out alternative voices and interests. Finally, the analysis touches on the way (un)employment was explained to the public – the kind of factors that figured in the explanation of the causes of job creation and job loss. This touches on the way the news connects a social phenomenon – in this case (un)employment – to the action or inactions of particular players, factors and processes. The way this shakes out in terms of coverage is important in determining the way the government and other players are either held responsible for positive economic outcomes (and therefore to be praised) or are seen as culpability for negative results, and therefore might be blamed.

The object of the analysis was the prime-time, flagship news broadcasts on the main public service and commercial channels, notably BBC Nine O’clock News and News at Ten. The stories concerning unemployment were part of a broader body of stories generated as part of an ESRC sponsored study of the impact of economic news.² To begin with, stories bearing on (un)employment were isolated from the run of reports.³ The resultant transcribed corpus was exhaustive and straddled the period between mid-1997 and December 2001. Existing research on the impact of economic news on public opinion gave a convenient and useful way of categorising stories according to their overall tenor (Gavin and Sanders, 1996 and 1998; Sanders and Gavin, 2004). An individual news story might be balanced, but more commonly they tend to either emphasise ‘the negative’, like job losses, lay-offs etc,
where the job losses would come from or how many would go until they’ve discussed terms with the unions.” (ITN, 1st February 1999).

“or ‘positive’ developments, like job creation, or the decline in unemployment,

ANCHOR: Pilot schemes for the Government’s so-called ‘New Deal’ for young unemployed people have begun across the country at a cost of £3 billion. An extra £250 million will also be provided to help people over twenty five back to work. The scheme offers a choice of subsidised work or full-time study. Those who refuse to take part will have their benefits cut. (BBC, 5th January 1998)

Such stories were classified as either ‘positive’ (+1) or ‘negative’ (-1) according to the overall balance of news in their opening sequences. Subsequently, the ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ stories were collated, and the number of +1s and of -1s were added up to express the overall balance for each of the months in the corpus.4

Good news over bad?

The results from this assessment are represented in Figures 2 and 3. Each entry represents the numerical balance of ‘good news’ and ‘bad news’ stories for any given month. For example, in July 1997 on BBC there were four more ‘good news’ stories than there were ‘bad news’ ones, showing as a ‘+4’ in the Figure. The reverse was true for November 1997. What is most obviously apparent is that for both BBC and ITN the number of months where ‘good news’ stories outnumbers ‘bad news’ ones were very few and far between. Both channels saw a cluster at the beginning of the period assessed. There were also a few positive blips on BBC in autumn 2000 and spring 2001, and on ITN in late 1999 and early 2000. However, overall the picture is one where bad news predominates, a feature that appeared to get worse towards the end of the period, as we can see from the line fitted to the BBC and ITN data.5 So the position for New Labour appears to have got worse as their first administration came to an end and their second term began.

The results here are significant for a number of reasons. The research on the impact of such news clearly shows that not only does this form of representation affect the salience of economic issues (Gavin, forthcoming), but it has a consistent, significant and non-trivial effect on the public’s perception of the health or otherwise of the economy (Gavin and
Sanders, 1996 and 1998; Sanders and Gavin, 2004). This, in turn, influences the citizen’s views of the government’s competence in handling the economy and, subsequently, their support for the administration. In short, this coverage will have made a difference. That it will have done so, will no doubt have galled the government, since the trends in (un)employment at the time gave grounds for considerable optimism. As we can see in Figure 3, unemployment as measured by the claimant count was on a downward trend that was to continue until late 2004. This particular measure of unemployment has been controversial in the past. But even the evaluation offered by the more widely accepted Labour Force Survey, show that not only was unemployment falling, but employment in the labour market was rising briskly too (see Figures 4 and 5). Not surprisingly, then, there were a number of points where the news suggested that unemployment was at a historical low,

“Unemployment’s fallen to its lowest level in ten years (Anchor, BBC, 12th August 1998).

“Unemployment is down again to its lowest level for nearly 20 years.” (Anchor, BBC, 15th December, 1999).

But nevertheless, the overall pattern is of coverage dominated by unemployment and job losses.

The coverage, in this context, expresses a form of ‘negativising’ imbalance or bias that has been analysed more fully elsewhere (see Gavin, forthcoming). The stories may simply be the product of conventional news values that put a premium on simple, clear narratives carrying dramatic developments of social or economic significance (Palmer, 1998; Harcup and O’Neill, 2001). But this was still bad news for the government and their cohorts of spin doctors. The results, therefore, have a bearing on the government’s ability – or, more precisely, its inability – to dominate or even influence the agenda. One of two things appears to have been happening. The administration’s image management machinery may not have been keeping its eye on this particular ball, and failed to intervene, with the result that New Labour got an undeserved bad press. Alternatively, they were in fact strenuously engaged in image management and just failed to make an impression at a time when things were, in fact, going rather well for them in terms of the economy. Only a retrospective, interview-based analysis of economic spin management under New Labour (and of journalists’ response to it) could determine which of these is more plausible. But either way the story does not speak to the government’s overwhelming success in influencing, let alone determining, the issue space
it inhabits. Contrary to the view of News Labour spin doctors were the arch ‘sultans of spin’, the situation here was one in which important themes were overlooked or important opportunities missed. Either way, the notion that governments and their communication apparatuses could, and frequently did, influence the issue agenda in a decisive fashion, looks rather suspect in the light of these results.

Who speaks?

A similar story might be told with regard to the range of ‘voices’ that are heard on (un)employment news. The issue of who is given space to speak in the media is an important one. Potentially, they can act as the ‘primary definers’ in a report (Hall, 1978), setting out the terms of debate, delineating the breadth of argument, or constraining the range of positions expressed. Form this perspective, they are important ‘ideas brokers’, and critical commentary has tended to suggest that elite voices tend to dominate. Now, while these may not be the only source a journalists will use in the construction of a story, the voices heard give a report a narrative drive and a degree of personalised immediacy. Consequently, who gets on, and who does not, is important. Who, then, got to speak in the (un)employment news surveyed? It was not possible to trawl all the stories that figured in the previous section. The corpus examined there was particularly large, and an assessment of the range of voices accessed would have been too difficult on this scale. Nevertheless, two years worth of economic news (extending from January 1998 to December 1999) were analysed to determine the identity of those who were allowed to speak. This period was early in the first New Labour administration where, as noted earlier, the powers of the spin doctors were thought to be at their zenith. Each separate ‘voice’ that appeared in a news report was isolated, identified and placed in one of ten categories.

The results are presented in Table 1, and a number of features are clear. The government evidently (and unsurprisingly) outmatches the other political parties with respect to on-screen profile, with New Labour representatives appearing twice as often as their Conservative and Liberal Democratic counterparts. But perhaps the most significant feature of Table 1 is the fact that it was not the government, nor even the corporate community, who figured most often in news stories, but the general public in the form of a ‘vox pop’ element. This group (if
indeed they can be called ‘a group’) were the most regular individual contributors to news. Admittedly, the public are often given only a short space of time in front of the cameras. For example, in a story headlines ‘Hundreds of jobs axed in Blair’s own back yard’ (ITN September 4th 1998), one worker laments that, “The semi-conductor industry, there’s nothing in there for Britain, it’s totally gone.”, while the other says, “I’m afraid it’s just back to a normal factory job, I think, and wasted skills and a wasted three years for me personally.”. Likewise, on 23rd of July 1998, when the BBC ran a story about the Scottish Secretary closing down Direct Labour Organisations (DLOs), two workers are reported. The second of them only had space to say, “It’s a disgrace. Never had this trouble in my life.”. However, in both stories those affected were able to convey quite forcefully and bluntly their responses and reactions to developments. And on top of this, even leaving aside the ‘vox pop’ components of the reports, the trades unions and consumer groups figure much more often than Her Majesty’s Opposition, and their prominence is on a par (though not quite as strong) as the government’s. Not untypically, the Scottish Trades Union Congress representative who follows on from the workers in the DLO story is given as much space as corporate or government sources generally are:

“There are thousands of workers and their families, across Lanarkshire and Ayrshire tonight, who are extremely unhappy, extremely bitter and extremely disappointed. They kept the DLOs going for 18 years of a Tory government, and within 18 months of a Labour Government, they’re facing redundancy.”

The implications of this need to be understood in the light of the results for the preceding section. The economy – for which the government has primary responsibility – was not only portrayed in a more negative light than was perhaps justified, but those most directly and negatively affected were given ample space to convey how they felt and what it meant for them. There was no obvious dominance of the airwaves by the voices from the corporate elite (cf Davis, 2002 and 2003), let alone the governing one. The usual suspects normally thought to constitute the primary definers, were not obviously ‘primary’ in this instance. Nor can we say that this was a function of the factors which are said to weaken the empirical plausibility of the notion of ‘primary definition’ or undermine its theoretical utility – principally, the idea that governments and organised interests are rarely monolithic blocs, and are therefore prone to indiscipline and factionalism (Schlesinger, 1990; Schlesinger and Tumber, 1994). New Labour, at the time, was as disciplined as any political machine gets, and the spin machine was a good deal more unified than it was to become later (Kuhn, 2005). But regardless of
how we explain the government’s failure to press its definition of events onto the agenda, the
fact remain that it image management machinery seems to have failed to make a decisive
impression in this strategically important discursive domain.

Connecting the government to (un)employment

However, if those most directly and negatively affected by unemployment were not only
vocal, but were also offered a significant proportion of airtime, we still need to know whether
their shouts of pain were directed at the corporate or business community, rather than at the
government. This in itself would have been a victory of sorts for a government spin machine,
and might have constituted a form of ‘deflection’. And, indeed, evidence presented elsewhere
(see Gavin, forthcoming) shows that where the news offered commentary on the explanations
for (un)employment, they tended to feature an important role for the corporation or for
business management:

“How does the Rover Group is poised to announce 1,500 job losses as the strong pound
begins to bite. Anchor: The car company is to cut its workforce in the Midlands by 1,500”
(BBC, 22nd July 1998)

or

“Hundreds of insurance jobs face the axe today after Guardian Royal Exchange accepted a
£3.45 billion takeover bid from Sun Life and Provincial. The company haven’t said where the
job losses would come from or how many would go until they’ve discussed terms with the
unions.” (ITN 1st February 1999)

Table 2 outlines the range of causal agents and forces that were implicated in fluctuations in
employment. The entries represent the number of separate instances within stories where
particular actors, processes or developments were identified. As we can see, corporate
decision alongside the dynamics of company mergers figure prominently. The corporate
sector, then, was portrayed as bearing much of the direct responsibility for job losses (as well
as gains), though generally they, in turn, were hedged about by forces that might be beyond
their control. This can be illustrated by a story headlined “Shell shuts its UK headquarters as
jobs crisis mounts.” (ITN, 18th September 1998), where the commentary goes on to
pronounce,
“It’s a London landmark, and it’s a sign of the economic times that the imposing Shell Mex House along with other European offices is to close. The world financial downturn is the reason Shell UK jobs are now on the line.”

These snippets, accordingly, figure in the respective columns in Table 2 under ‘A.1’ and ‘B.4’. Clearly the corporate sector are in the firing line, but so too were the government, as we can see from section ‘C’. A range of government-related decisions, policies and activities were flagged by both BBC and ITN as implicated in changes in employment. However, the table only offers an outline of these connections. There is little by way of detail, though with the degree of negativising apparent from preceding analyses, it might be anticipated that in the domain of employment, New Labour was being associated with the creation of ‘problems’, rather than with their solution. To test whether this was indeed the case, the stories containing references to the government were isolated and their topic examined in detail. The question is whether the government, at a time of declining unemployment and a burgeoning jobs market was able to force good news stories about their role onto the agenda, or alternatively, obscure their association with bad news.

In the course of the two years of news surveyed there were thirty five stories on BBC and nineteen on ITN which figured government involvement, in one form or another. A precise of the topic of these stories is illustrated by the list described in the Appendix. There were obviously a lot of successes for New Labour. Unsurprisingly, the vast majority of these revolved around the issue of its ‘New Deal’ on employment, and the ‘Welfare to Work’ programme, for which the government got credit throughout the two years of coverage surveyed:

“The News Deal to get people off benefits and into work, was launched today by the Government. It’ll focus primarily on the young jobless, but it’ll also be expanded to include older, long-term unemployed.” (anchor, ITN, 5th January 1998)

and

“Brown sticks his neck out on jobs – full employment is within reach” (headline, BBC, 27th September 1999).

In addition, there were a number of reference to increased public spending, where this was to result in more front-line nurses, teachers and police personnel being recruited:
“The National Health Service was today promised seven thousand more doctors and fifteen thousand more nurses as a result of the extra spending announced on Tuesday.” (Anchor, ITN, 16th July 1998)

Clearly, the government was capable of making a splash. However, as we can see from the bottom half of the Appendix, it is equally clearly that there were numerous stories across the period where New Labour signally failed to dodge the flak. They were regularly on the receiving end of a range of bad news stories, some of them relating to areas of the economy where there were acute sensitivities, and vulnerable people involved:

Union leaders are calling on the Government to change its mind over the closure of a number of the Remploy factories which supply work for more than 1,000 disabled people. Remploy is Britain’s biggest employer of disabled people and the unions are concerned that the workers affected could end up without a job and on benefit.” (anchor, BBC, 27th August 1999)

And neither was this particular ‘bad news’ story an aberration in a run of otherwise ‘good news’ reports. The Appendix makes it clear that there were almost as many ‘bad news’ as ‘good news’ stories, and that these were dispersed across a range of policy domains, events and developments. The government, despite a very promising context of declining unemployment overall, and a record numbers of people in gainful employment, was unable to avoid or play down the negative implications of its decisions, actions or inactions. Clearly, there was a limit to spin, rebuttal and image management in this particular, strategically important domain.

Those instances where the government was directly implicated in the negative consequences of unemployment are very important. Governments in Britain are perceived to be responsible for the general state of the economy (Paulson, 1994), so adverse news about employment is bad enough. However, there is a growing body of research from the political science community suggesting that there needs to be a direct linkage between government responsibility for positive developments, or culpability for negative ones, before this translates into increased or decreased popularity (Lau and Sears, 1981; Peffley, 1984; Peffley and Williams, 1985; Petrocik and Steeper, 1986; Abramowitz et al 1988; Iyengar, 1989; Sigelman et al 1991; Shields and Goidel, 1998; Anderson, 2000; and Johnston and Pattie, 2002). In other words, public disenchantment with the government is partly conditional on citizens making a connection between government (in)activity and subsequent social, political or economic developments. And the sort of news outlined in the bottom half of the Appendix allowed them to make just such a connection. These reports may have constituted
what looked like a degree of balance in the overall tenor of commentary. But given the backdrop of falling unemployment and rising numbers in jobs, one wonders whether the government could have made more political capital out of its economic achievements.

Conclusions

Lees-Marshment (2004) remarks that, “In business as well as politics, a market-orientation in politics is about creating a credible product that will satisfy the user in order to achieve organisational goals.” (p.396). Still, you cannot market or spin a dubious product, as some have noted with regard to Europe and the euro (Gavin, forthcoming). However, the results from the preceding argument suggest that sometimes you cannot even spin a good product. And if it is, indeed, true that, “Spin seeks to close down all meanings which are not in the perceived interests of the client, and to make the client preferred reading the dominant one in media terms” (McNair, 2000b p.125), then New Labour does not appear to have been all that effective in this particular and important instance. This is in tune with those authors who suggest that image management is not the threat it is often portrayed (Palmer, 2002), or those who feel that the demonisation of the spin doctors is not wholly justified (McNair, 2000b).

The conclusions that follow from this are significant. We may hypothesise that the relationships outlined in Figure 1 may, indeed, be reciprocal. But we cannot assume either that they are reciprocally symmetrical, or that some relationships are necessarily always weak or others strong. For instance, one can occasionally get the sense from critical commentary that because image manage and spin are ubiquitous, they must be effective. But this notion is suspect, as we have seen. Likewise, we might have anticipated that the public would have a limited or circumscribed position within news commentary, but obviously this is not uniformly true. And it would also be wholly wrong to assume, as some do, that the coverage produced by news organisations necessarily has a pervasive influence on the public:

"In the light of previous research on the reception of media texts, it would seem justified to assume that those texts themselves provide a powerful input to everyone exposed to them, one that influences all further communication" (Meyer, 2002, p.2, emphasis original).

Instead, the research on the influence of unemployment news suggests that, when it comes to television, there is only an elliptical impact on the salience of the economy for the public (Gavin, forthcoming). And when the impact is on attitudes rather than salience, the effects are
consistent, but not determinate or overpowering (Gavin and Sanders, 1996 and 1998; Sanders and Gavin, 2004). Furthermore, when such news comes from the press, it has an influence on public opinion that is limited to broadsheet buyers, or only parts of the mid-market readership, with the tabloids signally failing to make any impression whatsoever (Gavin and Sanders, 2003).

So, if we are to assess the overall significance of various relationships and process that link the public, the media, organised interests and the government – in the domain of ‘the economy’, or beyond – we need to rely on systematically garnered evidence that encompasses not only the nexus between media and government or between public and government, but also those between media actors and their output, and subsequently between that output and public consciousness. A number of studies touch on some of these mediated elements (Yanovitzky, 2002; John, 2006), but few touch on all. Consequently, where there is theoretical or empirical exploration of the connection between the media, public opinion and government action, a rounded picture evidently needs to accommodate a wider range of actors and processes than are normally considered, as well as the conditionality of the relationships between them. But this is a tall order indeed.
FIGURE 1 PLAYERS AND PROCESSES

A: CONTENT DELIVERY; ATTITUDE FORMATION
B: AUDIENCE/READERSHIP DEMAND; CITIZEN ACCESS
C: POLICY IMPLEMENTATION/ DELIVERY
D: POLLING; ANTICIPATED REACTION; VOTING
E: OPINION ‘RE-EXPRESSION’; 3rd PERSON EFFECT; ANTICIPATED REACTION
F: POLITICAL MARKETING; SPIN
G: REINFORCEMENT OF MOBILISATION
H: LOBBYING; ANTICIPATED REACTION
I: POLICY NETWORK ENCOURAGEMENT
FIGURE 2: BALANCE OF ‘POSITIVE’ AND ‘NEGATIVE’ (UN)EMPLOYMENT STORIES ON BBC FLAGSHIP BULLETINS, WITH FITTED LINE, JANUARY 1997-DECEMBER 2001
FIGURE 3: BALANCE OF ‘POSITIVE’ AND ‘NEGATIVE’ (UN)EMPLOYMENT STORIES ON ITN FLAGSHIP BULLETINS, WITH FITTED LINE, JANUARY 1997-DECEMBER 2001
FIGURE 3: UNEMPLOYMENT CLAIMANT COUNT (%), WITH FITTED LINE, APRIL 1998 – DECEMBER 2001

Source: ONS: http://www.statistics.gov.uk/downloads/theme_compendia/MD_December_2002/MD_December02.pdf
FIGURE 4: UNEMPLOYMENT (IN 1,000S)
LABOUR FORCE SURVEY JANUARY 1998-DECEMBER 2002

Source: ONS: http://www.statistics.gov.uk/downloads/theme_labour/LFSHQS/Table01.xls

FIGURE 5: EMPLOYMENT (IN 1,000S)
LABOUR FORCE SURVEY, JANUARY 1998-DECEMBER 2002

Source: ONS: http://www.statistics.gov.uk/downloads/theme_labour/LFSHQS/Table01.xls
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<th>Source</th>
<th>BBC 1998-99</th>
<th>ITN 1998-99</th>
<th>Total</th>
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<td>‘Vox Pop’</td>
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<td>62</td>
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<td>27</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job Centre, Civil Servants, Bank of England</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Politicians:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opposition</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unspecified</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>315</td>
<td>185</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Gavin (forthcoming).
| TABLE 2 | CAUSES OF (UN)EMPLOYMENT IN BBC AND ITN NEWS | JANUARY 1998- DECEMBER 1999 |
|-----------------|---------------------------------|------------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
|                | BBC 1998 | BBC 1999 | ITN 1998 | ITN 1999 | TOTAL |
| (A) COMPANY:   |          |          |          |          |       |
| 1. COMPANY TAKES ON/LAYS OFF/OPENS/SHUTS | 29 | 20 | 18 | 8 | 75 |
| 2. MERGER(S) or TAKEOVER(S) | 10 | 13 | 3 | 7 | 33 |
| 3. INVESTMENT | 12 | 5 | 13 | 0 | 30 |
| 4. COSTS or LOSSES | 9 | 10 | 4 | 5 | 28 |
| 5. PROFIT/LOSS: | 13 | 4 | 2 | 5 | 24 |
| 6. COMPETITION | 2 | 8 | 5 | 3 | 18 |
| 7. SALES/TRADE/ORDERS/OUTPUT/Demand | 8 | 3 | 4 | 2 | 17 |
| 8. CONTRACTS | 2 | 6 | 4 | 1 | 13 |
| 9. PRODUCTION | 7 | 0 | 5 | 0 | 12 |
| 10. TRANSFERRING ABROAD | 5 | 3 | 1 | 1 | 10 |
| 11. SOURCING ABROAD | 2 | 7 | 1 | 0 | 10 |
| 12. NEW PRODUCT LINE(S) | 5 | 3 | 2 | 0 | 10 |
| 13. REORGANISATION | 5 | 3 | 1 | 0 | 9 |
| 14. PRICES THAT CUSTOMERS ARE CHARGED | 3 | 2 | 0 | 2 | 7 |
| 15. RELOCATION | 1 | 0 | 4 | 0 | 5 |
| 16. WAGES PAID/PAY | 3 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 4 |
| 17. CHANG(E)ING OF SUPPLIER | 0 | 2 | 2 | 0 | 4 |
| 18. EFFICIENCY TARGETS or GAINS or SAVINGS | 2 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 3 |
| 19. MANAGEMENT FAILURES | 3 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 3 |
| 20. BUILDING PROJECT(S) | 0 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 2 |
| 21. BEING ‘UNECONOMIC’ | 0 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 2 |
| (B) ECONOMIC |          |          |          |          |       |
| 1. NATIONAL/REGIONAL: SLOWDOWN/UPTURN | 28 | 7 | 12 | 4 | 51 |
| 2. HIGH POUND | 22 | 4 | 13 | 0 | 39 |
| 3. INTEREST RATES: INCREASE(ING)/DECREASE(ING) | 9 | 3 | 13 | 1 | 26 |
| 4. GLOBAL: SLOWDOWN/UPTURN | 11 | 1 | 8 | 0 | 20 |
| 5. INFLATION: HIGH/LOW/(DE)INCREASING | 6 | 1 | 3 | 0 | 13 |
| 6. BANK OF ENGLAND (ACTION/INACTION) | 8 | 1 | 2 | 0 | 11 |
| 7. TELEPHONE/INTERNET BANKING | 0 | 5 | 1 | 2 | 8 |
| 8. ASIAN: SLOWDOWN/UPTURN | 4 | 0 | 3 | 0 | 7 |
| 9. COMPUTERISATION | 1 | 0 | 0 | 3 | 4 |
| 10. TRADE WAR(S)/SANCTIONS (U.S.A.) | 0 | 4 | 0 | 0 | 4 |
| 11. INTERNET SALES/REVOLUTION | 0 | 3 | 0 | 0 | 3 |
| (C) GOVERNMENT |          |          |          |          |       |
| 1. ACTION(S)/INACTION(S)/DECISIONS/SPENDING | 26 | 14 | 19 | 5 | 64 |
| 2. ‘NEW DEAL’/‘WELFARE-TO-WORK’ | 12 | 1 | 8 | 0 | 21 |
| 3. AID/SUBSIDIES/GRANTS | 5 | 4 | 2 | 1 | 12 |
| 4. TAXATION/TAX SYSTEM | 7 | 0 | 5 | 0 | 12 |
| 5. BENEFIT/WELFARE SYSTEM | 9 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 10 |
| 6. UTILITY REGULATIONS/PRICE REVIEW(S) | 0 | 3 | 0 | 3 | 6 |
| 7. REGULATION | 1 | 4 | 0 | 0 | 5 |
| 8. MINIMUM WAGE | 0 | 0 | 3 | 1 | 4 |
| 9. NATIONALISATION/PRIVATISATION | 2 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 3 |
| (D) EUROPEAN UNION |          |          |          |          |       |
| 1. ‘DUTY FREE’ ABOLITION | 0 | 3 | 2 | 3 | 8 |
| 2. FISHERIES POLICY | 0 | 1 | 0 | 2 | 3 |
| 3. AID or AID WITHDRAWAL | 0 | 3 | 0 | 0 | 3 |
| 4. ENVIRONMENTAL RULES | 0 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 2 |
| 5. TAX HARMONISATION | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 |
| 6. REGULATION | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| (E) TRADES UNIONS/INDUSTRIAL DISPUTES |          |          |          |          |       |
| 8 | 2 | 3 | 0 | 13 |
| (F) REGIONAL POLITICS |          |          |          |          |       |
| 1. SCOTTISH INDEPENDENCE | 0 | 1 | 0 | 2 | 3 |
| 2. NORTHERN IRELAND PEACE DIVIDEND | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 |

Source: Gavin (forthcoming)
Appendix

Essence of the stories in which references to government responsibility (or culpability) figure:

Good news connections

‘New Deal’ helps people back to work (BBC 5\textsuperscript{th} Jan 1998)
‘New Deal’ to get people into work (ITN 5\textsuperscript{th} Jan 1998)
Grants to car industry help create employment (ITN 6\textsuperscript{th} Jan 1998)
‘Welfare to Work’ programmes help 18-24 year olds off the dole (BBC Feb 3\textsuperscript{rd} 1998)
‘New Deal’ to tackle youth unemployment (ITN 11\textsuperscript{th} Feb 1998)
Education investment leads to more teachers being hired (BBC 12\textsuperscript{th} Feb 1998)
New money funds more teacher’s jobs (ITN 12\textsuperscript{th} Feb 1998)
Chancellor advocates government spending to address unemployment (BBC 20\textsuperscript{th} Feb 1998)
Budget designed to get people off welfare and back to jobs (BBC17\textsuperscript{th} Mar 1998).
Budget to get people off welfare and into jobs (ITN 18\textsuperscript{th} Mar 1998)
‘News Deal’ tackles unemployment (BBC 6\textsuperscript{th} April 1998)
Extension of ‘New Deal’ to give opportunities for jobs (ITN 6\textsuperscript{th} Apr 1998)
Blocking of gas-fired power station building saves miner’s jobs (BBC 8\textsuperscript{th} Jun 1998)
New Deal helps long-term unemployed to find jobs (ITN 29\textsuperscript{th} Jun 1998)
Education spending will mean 6000 more teachers (ITN 15\textsuperscript{th} July 1998)
More doctors and nurses jobs promised (ITN 16\textsuperscript{th} July 1998)
Scheme helps long-term jobless back to work (BBC 24\textsuperscript{th} Aug 1998)
Government ‘noises’ prevents Royal Ballet prevents its board announcing closure (BBC 9\textsuperscript{th} Sept 1998)
Government to offer package to retrain people to get jobs (ITN 16\textsuperscript{th} Sept)
New agency need to help re-employ Vickers workers (ITN 17\textsuperscript{th} Sept 1998)
Blocking of gas-fired power station building saves miner’s jobs (BBC 8\textsuperscript{th} Oct 1998)
Government grants to the car industry may prevent plant closure (BBC 27\textsuperscript{th} Nov 1998)
Government claims lowest unemployment in 20 years proof of their schemes (BBC 13\textsuperscript{th} Jan 1999)
Trade Secretary pressures Rover to keep plant open (BBC 8\textsuperscript{th} Feb 1999)
Government financial assistance will help Rover plant stay open (BBC 8\textsuperscript{th} Mar 1999)
Government to intercede to save Kvaerner yard (BBC 14\textsuperscript{th} Apr 1999)
Chancellor seeks goal of full employment (BBC 27\textsuperscript{th} Sept 1999)
Government spending helps recruit 11,000 new police officers (BBC 30\textsuperscript{th} Sept 1999)

Bad news connections

Refusal to invest in Channel Tunnel threatens future of the business (BBC 29\textsuperscript{th} Jan. 1998)
Rescue package refusal threatens Cornish miner’s jobs (BBC 5\textsuperscript{th} Feb. 1998)
Minimum wage could jeopardise jobs and the ‘New Deal’ (ITN 28\textsuperscript{th} May 1998)
Government decides to close down Dounreay nuclear power plant (BBC 5\textsuperscript{th} Jun. 1998)
Dounreay to close (ITN 5\textsuperscript{th} Jun 1998)
Scottish Secretary closes down Direct Labour Organisations (BBC 23\textsuperscript{rd} Jul. 1998)
Hague says Government responsibility for high interest rates causes job losses (BBC 4\textsuperscript{th} Sept 1998)
Fujitsu decision to shed jobs influenced by Government policy (ITN 4\textsuperscript{th} Sept 1998)
Government fails to prevent computer jobs going (BBC 16\textsuperscript{th} Sept 1998)
Redwood says government has precipitated closures in British manufacturing (BBC 21\textsuperscript{st} Oct 1998)
Government fails to prevent job losses in ‘banana war’ (BBC 4\textsuperscript{th} Mar 1999)
Pharmacy jobs to go as Office of Fair Trading changes pricing regime (ITN 11\textsuperscript{th} Mar 1999)
Employers claim Government’s raising of minimum wage will cost jobs (ITN 1\textsuperscript{st} Apr 1999)
Change in grant maintained school funding arrangements leads to lay-offs (BBC 20\textsuperscript{th} Apr 1999)
SNP claim job losses are due to Government mismanagement (ITN 21\textsuperscript{st} Apr 1999)
No help with Bridgend jobs? (BBC 28\textsuperscript{th} May 1999)
Deputy PM orders closer of coastguard centres (ITN 12\textsuperscript{th} Aug 1999)
Government to close Remploy factories, the UK’s biggest employer of the handicapped (BBC 27\textsuperscript{th} Aug 1999)
Government promises no compulsory redundancies from Remploy factory closures (ITN 27\textsuperscript{th} Aug 1999)
New jobs cancelled as Deputy PM blocks development of a Cambridge business park (BBC 9\textsuperscript{th} Sept 1999)
Government will not intervene to save Ellington colliery (BBC 1\textsuperscript{st} Nov 1999)
Hope that Government will not wash its hands if situation in Welsh water industry (BBC 9\textsuperscript{th} Dec 1999)
Package to help Rover broke EU competition rules (BBC 17\textsuperscript{th} Dec 1999).
Bibliography


The data is derived from a project titled ‘Press, Television And Political And Economic Opinion in Britain’ (ref. R000221336), and the generous support of the ESRC for this is gratefully acknowledged.

The onus was on stories dealing with the following issues: closing/closure of business(es), (un)employment, jobs/jobless, redundancies, staff(ing), posts, work, axe, shut(ing)/open(ing)/set(ing) up of business(es), lay-off(s), or go(ing) bust/to the wall/out of business.

For a clearer sense of the coding structure see Gavin and Sanders (1998) and Sanders and Gavin (2004), or contact the author for more detail.

Technically speaking, this represents a regression line with the generic structure $y = a(x) + b$. Here ‘a’ is the gradient and ‘b’ the point where it hits the vertical axis. In mathematical terms the line minimises the sum of the squares of the distances between each observation and the line itself.

See: www.statistics.gov.uk/articles/nojournal/SAR_CC06.pdf