The Mass Media in Britain and the United States

Introduction

By the mass media, we mean those means of communication which permit messages to be conveyed to the public. Media such as television, radio, newspapers, books, magazines, posters, the cinema and, more recently, videos and computers provide important links connecting people to one another. They allow information to be passed from one person to a vast audience at approximately the same time. Sending a fax or e-mail to a friend is a personal form of communication, but if the message is sent simultaneously to large numbers of people it becomes part of the mass media. The mass media can reach a large and potentially unlimited number of people at the same time. The most important forms of the media are newspapers and broadcasting by radio and television, but over the last generation television has surpassed any other medium as the source from which the majority of people derive their information, for it provides an easily accessible, easily digested and credible medium available in almost every household. Today, how voters view politics and politicians is much influenced by television. Politicians recognise this and act accordingly, often seeking to influence the television at least as much as they are influenced by it.

I. Organisation, ownership and control in Britain and America

Britain has a centralised communications system, a factor related to geography and population distribution. By European standards, the population is urbanised, the majority living in the area between London and Manchester. Regional media declined as the twentieth century progressed. The regional press has become significantly smaller since 1918, and although since the early days BBC and ITV have always had a regional element, BBC2 and Channels Four and Five are solely national ones. The political system too has always been highly centralised, encouraging the media to emphasise national concerns at the expense of regional ones. Another feature of the British media is the balance which has been struck between the values of commercialism and public service. Commercialism is represented by the private ownership of the press and of ITV, and public service by the BBC. There is a public-service requirement to which commercial television broadcasters are expected to respond. Much of the development in the British media has been influenced by what has happened in the USA. Ideas and innovations have often come from across the Atlantic, and many press moguls on the British stage have spent much of their life in North America – the Astor family, the Canadians Roy Thomson and Conrad Black, and the Australian-American Rupert Murdoch. Many American communications companies are active in Britain, with several cable concerns and some large telephone companies having bases here.

The relaxation of the regulations on cross-media ownership in recent years has meant that several media companies have emerged with wide interests in several areas of the communications industry. For example:

• ***News International*** owns several newspaper titles (*The Times*, the *Sunday Times*, *The News of the World* and *The Sun*), 40 per cent of BSkyB, Harper-Collins (the book publisher), a share in Talk Radio, apart from its worldwide interests in Australia, America and Asia.

• ***Pearson*** owns the *Financial Times*, North of England Newspapers, Westminster Press, Thames TV, an interest in Essex Radio, and publishing chains such as Longman, Penguin and Viking.

The two older technologies, newspapers and the radio, continue to be significant among the American media. Newspapers are the oldest form of mass communication in the US, with some 80 per cent of adult Americans now reading a paper on a regular basis. America has traditionally lacked a strong national press, which is not surprising given the divergent interests of people in different parts of the country, and the difficulties of transporting morning editions quickly around the country. The middle-market *USA Today* has helped to fill the gap, but the likelihood is that over the next few years more national papers will be created, given the new technology available. In the meantime, however, in most American cities there is only one regular newspaper available, although countrywide there are some 1800 titles. Small-town dailies thrive on presenting stories of local interest, but may also provide a sketchy coverage of national events.

Unlike Britain, there is no concept of public service broadcasting in America, on either radio or television. Radio is still extensively used in the United States. It had always remained popular as an outlet for political advertising in some of the smaller states, but has recently experienced a surprising revival in the television age. The popularity of chat shows and particularly phone-in programmes of the *Talk Radio* variety has aroused considerable interest, as have the new stations which cater for minority groups and tastes. Radio talk shows have been described as the equivalent of 'a 1990s American town meeting',3 a chance for the voters to listen to and call the candidates. These may have vast audiences, and act as a lively medium for the exchange of views between often-conservative presenters and equally (if not more) right-wing listeners. Individuals can vent their feelings, however blatant, and listen to those of others.

Television in the USA is still dominated by three major commercial TV networks – CBS, NBC and ABC – although their hold has weakened in recent years. These networks sell programmes to local broadcast stations known as affiliates, and in 1995 the three long-established ones each had more than 200 of these, Fox Broadcasting some 150 or so. What has happened in the last decade, is that the hold of the three networks has been challenged not only by Fox but also by the development of new technologies which are widening the choice available to viewers. Many Americans now get their television signals not over the air but via cables. Several cable-only channels have emerged, such as CNN and C-Span.

II. Political coverage in the media in Britain and America

1. Setting the agenda

Agenda-setting is a key function of the media. Editors and journalists create an agenda of national priorities, deciding what is to be regarded as serious, what counts for little and what can be ignored. If an issue appears on the journalists' agenda, it is likely to be more widely discussed by individuals and groups in society. The media may not have the power to tell people what they should think, but they can tell them what they should be thinking about. By emphasizing the problems of inner cities in Britain, or of environmental degradation and of national defence in America, they have an effect on people's perceptions of how important these issues really are. The mass media, ever on the look-out for a good story, find the political arena an almost limitless source of material. The demand for news is ever-increasing, and both broadcasters and politicians have an interest in what is presented and how stories are handled. Political stories can be welcome to politicians as a vehicle for publicity and promotion of their ideas, but if they are hostile they may be viewed with alarm. For the broadcasting media, they are the very essence of lively journalism.

2. The nature and quality of coverage

Political exposure on television comes via several outlets. Politicians appear on a range of programmes from news bulletins to current affairs episodes, from the broadcasting of political events to special election features. There are also newer types of coverage. The Americans speak of 'infotainment': programmes which employ the techniques of entertainment to present more serious issues. Among them are chat shows, which have a markedly less political agenda but which still provide an opportunity to project personality and get the message across in a less demanding atmosphere.

In recent years, the trend has been for even the more overtly political programmes to be presented in a way which grabs the attention. Rather than the early methods of 'talking heads', round-table discussions between weighty interviewees and a generally serious treatment of heavy issues, the emphasis is on featuring stories which are 'made for television', with good pictorial backup. Such developments feed the fears of those who feel that television tends to trivialise and sensationalise politics. Producers are always on the look-out for opportunities to stress the confrontational approach, with plenty of personality clashes and scenes of groups and individuals locked in disagreement and conflict. As elections approach, these tendencies became ever more apparent. In addition, politicians can communicate via the press. They like to receive as much coverage of their meetings, speeches and performances in the legislature as possible, and they are often adept at sending communications to editors outlining their lists of engagements as well as summaries of their contributions to public debate. They may also write newspaper columns. Once elected, the US Presidents may make use of the televised Presidential Press Conference.

3. Political coverage at election time

- ***Political interviews***

There is a tradition in Britain of the extended political interview, often with a studio audience. They are less used in most other democracies and are not common in America. Interviews are useful as a means of establishing facts, probing motives and holding politicians to account. They also help the politician to develop his or her public persona, so that in Bruce's words, 'they are about performance'.

- ***Debates***

Britain has not yet staged a debate between the party leaders. (The nearest we have is the studio discussion in which a speaker from either side of the political divide is chosen to put forward the party's viewpoint.) Leaders of the Opposition tend to urge such contests, sensing an opportunity to embarrass an incumbent Prime Minister. Routinely, the people in Downing Street or their advisers, reject them, perhaps because – as with the political interview – once in the studio and under starter's orders, politicians are effectively on their own. As Bruce explains: 'Any incumbent who accepts the challenge of their opponent in this form needs their head examined. The latter has very little to lose and the former very little to gain'.

In America, debates have become the pre-eminent media event of the campaign, attracting vast audiences of 80–90 million. Depending on the format adopted they can be useful in clarifying the policies of those participating, and they allow the viewer to make a choice between the merits of rival candidates and to assess their effectiveness and sincerity when under pressure. American debates have been of varying quality, and the rules of engagement have differed from election to election. Some have almost certainly made a difference to the outcome (e.g. Kennedy v Nixon, in 1960), so that it is crucial for candidates to avoid mistakes. Errors have been made and some have been costly. President Ford committed an infamous gaffe and exposed his ignorance in 1976 when – at a time when the Cold War was still very much a part of the global scene – he said that Poland was not then under Soviet domination. By contrast, other candidates have used debates to their advantage. Whereas George Bush froze in front of the cameras in 1992 and Dole in 1996 similarly lumbered in discomfort, their opponent, Bill Clinton, was at home, using body language and eye contact to engage the viewer. George W. Bush also benefited from the debates, his relaxed manner contrasting markedly with the more aggressive style adopted by Gore. It was widely anticipated that he might suffer at the hands of the experienced Democrat who was better versed on policy issues. But in the event, simply by his avoidance of potentially costly mistakes, he benefited from the contests.

- ***Party broadcasts***

British politicians have a means of communicating with the electorate which is unknown in America, the Party Political Broadcast (PPB). At election time, Party Election Broadcasts (PEBs) are allocated to all parties who put up at least 70 candidates, the exact number depending on the number of votes received at the last election. The early ones were very amateurish, but after 1959 a new professionalism crept in. People who worked on PEBs were more skilled in the media, and occasionally 'stars' were brought in to lend support and add a touch of glamour. In the 1980s and 1990s, PPBs and PEBs developed into something more like their present form, often using music and landscapes effectively as in the 1987 **Kinnock – The Movie** broadcast, directed by an established professional film director, Hugh Hudson, who had been responsible for the highly successful film *Chariots of Fire*.

The trend has been for broadcasts to get shorter, more akin to American political advertisements. The Conservatives have often used less than their allocated time in recent years, in the knowledge that a brief slot can make catchy and memorable points. In 2001, none ran to more than five minutes; some were less than three. Labour's broadcasts were more celebratory in tone, with broadcasts about the 'real heroes who are building the fortune of Britain' (nurses, teachers and police officers, among them) in the 'new Britain', coupled with dire warnings of what might happen to the public services should their opponents return to power. Conservative ones were very negative in tone, often employing dark, menacing images. A part of the first broadcast dealt with crime, its approach being reminiscent of an American TV advert used by an 'independent' Bush-supporting PAC in 1988 against Michael Dukakis. Others depicted scary visions of further life under Labour.

- ***Political advertisements***

Whereas election broadcasts in Britain are strictly controlled, there are no such restrictions in America. A candidate may spend as much as he or she wished to on paid television time. Adverts place greater emphasis on candidates themselves rather than their party label. Those who make them are concerned to portray their candidate in a flattering light and to stress the demerits of their opponents. American political adverts are overwhelmingly negative, for research has suggested that this is the most effective approach. Consumers can take in only so much information at any one time and it is easier to implant a negative message than a positive one in a brief broadcast. Sometimes, adverts are longer portrayals, dwelling on the personal assets of the candidate. Television is good at handling personalities and telling stories, features which were combined in the 'Ron and Nancy' weepie in 1984 and the 'Man from Hope' film about Bill Clinton and his family eight years later. The former is thought to have provided the model for the 'Kinnock – The Movie' election broadcast used so effectively by Labour in 1987.

4. Television as a means of communication

The quality of news and current affairs programming matters for the public and the politicians. Ideally, coverage will be fair, balanced and interesting, straightforward and accessible for those who want a brief review and clear and comprehensive for those seeking a more detailed understanding. For many people, watching a news bulletin or reading a tabloid newspaper gives them as much information as they require. Others want more searching analysis and reflective comment to enable them to understand the background story behind the news. Television has weaknesses as a source of political education, some of which relate to the need for balance and impartiality. In interviews with leading TV personalities it is sometimes difficult for politicians to get their views across for their replies can be cut off prematurely or they may not be given a chance to provide an adequate answer. Sometimes a sharp intervention by the chairman of a discussion is necessary to get a response from professional politicians who are skilled at being evasive, but on occasion the interview can be dominated by the personality of the interviewer more than by the answer being attempted.

Furthermore, there is a need for speed and brevity on television, and great issues are sometimes not handled at length, arguments are left unexplored and to keep programmes alive and entertaining they can be superficial and trivial.

III. The effects of the media

The effects of television on politics and the electoral process cover three main aspects: the effects on elections and electioneering, the effects on political leaders and candidates, and the effects on the opinions of the electorate.

1. Elections and electioneering

Today, the media, especially television, largely determine the form of election campaigns. They have replaced political meetings in importance, to the extent that today any large meetings are relayed on television and geared to its needs. Each news bulletin accords coverage of the main politicians, so that the main meetings are stage-managed proceedings timed for maximum television coverage, and sound-bites are delivered to grab the headlines. The style of campaigning is much influenced by television. In America, electioneering is more candidate-centred, so that candidates rather than parties seek to gain popular approval and support. In Britain, party counts for more, but there is still an infatuation with personalities. Although party managers may still be interviewed and seek to use the medium to promote the party cause, it is the candidate who is the focus of media attention. They and their team of consultants are constantly on the look out for opportunities to ensure that they gain favourable coverage and are vigilant in watching out for any signs of bias against them. They attempt **'management' of the news**.

Political consultancy is an area that has mushroomed. According to Rees, there are at least some 10,000 political consultants in the United States. He quotes one Democrat consultant as saying: 'In America today, without good professional help, if you're running against a person who has professional help, you have virtually no chance of being elected'.10 These media advisers understand the way in which television works and what their candidate needs to do to create the right impression. They know that television is not just another channel of communication. It has 'changed the very way it has become necessary to communicate, and thus the very way it has become necessary to formulate political discourse'. Television has made the 'look' of a politician vital.

Politicians need to be acceptable to the ear, as well as to the eye. Television has actually changed what is said, as well as how it is said. The form of debate is influenced by the professional persuaders. As we have seen, politicians increasingly talk in memorable sound-bites. The emphasis of their discourse is on broad themes, the phrases being simple and often repeated. Frequently their language is couched in emotional terms. If the message can be illustrated by a suitable picture, so much the better.

2. Party leaders and candidates

Today, the tendency of journalists in the media is to presidentialise our election coverage and do less than justice to the issues involved, for, as Negrine observes, there is an 'infatuation with personalities and, in particular, political leaders'. Indeed, Foley notes that outside of an election period party leaders account for one-third of the time allocated to politicians in news coverage; during elections, the figures rises to half. This being the case, parties feel that they must choose politicians who are 'good on television'. Unsurprisingly, politicians are highly sensitive to the way in which their behaviour and actions are reported. They realise that television, in particular, can do them great damage. It also provides them with a remarkable opportunity to influence opinion.

IV. Televised politics in Britain and the USA compared: The Americanisation of British politics?

Britain has in many ways learnt from the American experience. Election campaigners have visited the United States and sometimes participated in elections there. Inevitably, their findings have been relayed to their colleagues back home. In addition, people in Britain see pictures of presidential electioneering, and there has often been discussion in the media of the techniques employed. As a result, America has been a useful source of innovation in British campaign techniques. Just as the Conservatives under Margaret Thatcher absorbed a lot from the Reagan experience in the mid–late 1980s, so too the Labour Party was keen to derive insights from the success of the Democrat, Bill Clinton, in 1992 and again in 1996.

In recent years, there has been an increasing British obsession with walkabouts, photo-opportunities and other **pseudo-events** created for the media. In the 1980s and 1990s, there have been several examples of the Americanisation of politics at work, not least in the style of some party broadcasts (Kinnock – The Movie, **Jennifer's Ear** and others), and in the **Sheffield Rally**, a triumphalist occasion very reminiscent of the American convention.
Yet there are differences and some safeguards. In Britain, we are electing a party rather than just one person, and politics is not about personality alone. The in-depth interview provides a kind of antidote to the dangers of shallow but media friendly leaders being chosen, for their personal qualities come under heavy scrutiny and in the in-depth Sunday lunchtime type of programme policy deficiencies can be much exposed. We also can now see our representatives in action in the House of Commons, and Question Time at least is an institution which shows those in power being forced to defend their position, even if it does little to inform people of the issues. The interviews conducted in the election in *Election Call* are a reminder of how leading figures can be put on the spot by skillful members of the public who can unsettle their composure.

V. The effects of television on the opinions of the voters

There have been four main theories concerning the study of the effects of the media on people's attitudes and conduct.

1. The hypodermic theory: Back in the 1930s, it was easy to think in terms of the importance of propaganda. The experience of the dictatorships, particularly Nazi Germany, led people to assume that the media must have a considerable impact, for Goebbels and others like him were making so much use of persuasive techniques. Against this background, some political scientists suggested that the message carried by the media was like a 'magic bullet' or hypodermic syringe which, on contact with the audience, affected it in a uniform way. People soaked up the information they were given, rather as a sponge absorbs water. The survey evidence to substantiate such findings was lacking. In any case, the effect of propaganda in a totalitarian regime was likely to be infinitely greater than in a liberal democracy such as America in which people could think, act and react under less threatening conditions.

2. The reinforcement theory: When researchers such as Paul Lazarsfeld looked for similar evidence of the impact of the media in postwar America, they were unable to find it. Using more modern and scientific techniques of investigation, Lazarsfeld found that there was no evidence to substantiate the idea of a significant effect. He first examined radio, and found no evidence of a decisive influence; indeed, 'it was the change of opinion which determined whether people listened, rather than their listening determining their change of opinion'.
The idea was that television acts primarily as a means of reinforcement rather than fundamental change. People exposed themselves to communications with which they were likely to agree, and tended to remember only information which coincided with their own outlook.

3. The agenda-setting theory: Coverage of the effects of the media moved on from the 'reinforcement' phase to the 'agenda-setting' one, according to which the media achieve their aim of influencing people by more subtle means. They can't directly tell people what to think, but they can tell them what to think about. They influence the public by determining what is shown or read, and many of the viewers/readers come to accept what is offered as a representation of the main things that are really happening. Television does help to set the agenda for discussion. Journalists (or more particularly their editors) and producers of television and radio programmes decide on what they consider to be the key issues worthy of investigation, follow-up reporting and commentary. If they choose to highlight the character of a candidate, the budget deficit or the problems of the ghettos, then these may well become influential factors in shaping the image which people have of personalities or events.

4. The independent effect theory*:* A fourth model is in vogue today. The 'independent effect theory' is now sometimes advocated by sociologists on both sides of the Atlantic. This suggests that the media do have an effect on public attitudes, even if those effects are difficult to monitor and are variable in their impact. The effects may be negative – e.g. by ignoring certain candidates, the media make people believe that they are not important or do not exist – and may have small-scale and short-term influence, but it is naive to write off the power of the media. In other words, it is misleading to speak of the impact of the media as though this was the same impact on all groups in the population. The effects of TV exposure may be entirely different on such categories as the young and the old, the employed and the unemployed. There are many effects on many different people.

Conclusion

The influence of the media is all-embracing. They are a tool of communications and a profitable economic resource. They also have significant political influence. Via news reports, entertainment and advertisements, they help to shape political attitudes. What is and what is not broadcast and printed helps to establish political figures, sets out priorities and focuses attention on issues. The media make politics intelligible to ordinary people. The media in turn are affected by the corporations which own them, the advertisers who pay for their messages and the public which looks, reads and listens to what they have to offer. Technology has increased the number and variety of outlets, and led to the merger of many of them, which are now part of giant media corporations. Political leaders grant or withhold licences, stage pseudo-events and make available or withhold information to them as suits their purposes.