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**A Crisis in Political Communications?**  
**Reflections of a Critical Practitioner**

**Commentary, Submitted in Partial Fulfilment for  
Doctor of Philosophy by Prior Publication**

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## **A Crisis in Political Communications? Reflections of a Critical Practitioner**

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## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **Introduction**

This submission is based on reflection, and scholarship, arising out of a career spanning four decades, divided between professional journalistic practice, teaching and research. The selected works, and this commentary, reflect my efforts to shed light on a range of ethical and professional journalistic issues, with two major strands running between them. First, an attempt to use my experience as a practitioner to provide a better understanding of the processes of journalism in general, and political journalism in particular, and in so doing to play a small part in the continuing efforts to bridge the long-standing gulf between media academics and practitioners. And second, to confront and engage with the current state of political communications in the UK.

Having called this submission “A Crisis in Political Communications? Reflections of a Critical Practitioner”, it would seem appropriate to begin this commentary by addressing this ‘crisis’ – if there is one. Many of the articles and chapters being submitted here do reflect the general tenor of those described as being part of the ‘crisis school’ (Davies 2010, Margaretten and Gaber 2012). Broadly this defines a group of scholars who argue that the quality of public and political debate, deliberation and participation, has been in systemic decline for the past three decades or so (Blumler and Gurevitch 1995, Dahlgren 1995, Fallows 1996, Postman 1985, Golding, Murdock and Schlesinger 1986, Franklin 2004 and many others) and hence the quality of our democracy has also been deteriorating. However, in the course of producing this submission I have decided to place a question mark after the word ‘crisis’. Certainly the past three decades represent perhaps the most dramatic and concentrated period of change in modern British political communications history but whether that amounts to a ‘crisis’ is something that is discussed later in this commentary.

### **The Public Sphere Reconsidered**

Any discussion about a ‘crisis’ in political or public communications must inevitably take as a starting point, either implicitly or explicitly, Jurgen Habermas’s notion of the public sphere as set out in “The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere” (Habermas 1989) and subsequently revised and amended by Habermas and others (Calhoun 1992, Goode 2005). There has been much debate about the underpinning concept, the historical accuracy – for Dahlgren a “melancholic historical narrative” (Dahlgren 1995:8) – and the contemporary

utility of Habermas's characterisation of the development of the European public sphere between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries (Calhoun 1992). My own position is that Habermas's characterisation does contain theoretical shortcomings and historical inaccuracies but that does not diminish the underlying importance of the public sphere as a conceptual tool for investigating the discursive processes of contemporary politics. This is a view very much in line with Castells' description of the public sphere as "a useful intellectual construct" (Castells 2008: 80).

In discussing the contemporary public sphere I will be using the term in the generally accepted sense of the word, rather than in any specific Habermasian sense; that is as a space where the private realm, the economic sphere, organised civil society and the political class notionally come together – mediated by both the traditional media and new media - to discuss current events, formulate policy and initiate political action. (Curran 1991) Davies literally sees the public sphere whilst gazing down on the atrium of Portcullis House, one of Parliament's main internal meeting places (Davies 2010). He sees conversations taking place there in the cafes and restaurants, between politicians, their staff and those who are anxious to meet with them to discuss, argue and lobby on matters of public and private policy. It is a seductive vision but, I would argue, somewhat misleading. This is because what Davies is actually seeing is a very partial view of today's public sphere. First, because only the more articulate and privileged of representatives of civil society, the private realm and the economic sphere, actually gain access to Portcullis House (lesser mortals have to content themselves with hurried conversations with MPs in the Central Lobby of the House of Commons). Second, that in addition to the absence of those 'below the radar', there is also an absence of those 'above the radar' - ministers, senior civil servants and other agents of state power who rarely venture into such spaces, precisely because they do not wish to be accosted by those whose attentions they would prefer to avoid.

Thus Portcullis House is a seductive but essentially misleading representation of today's public sphere. Unlike the coffee houses of Habermas's articulation, the contemporary public sphere is no longer, if it ever was, a single group of merchants and political writers discussing new ideas and formulating political demands. The contemporary public sphere is multi-faceted as Habermas concedes when he writes that it is probably unhelpful "to speak of one public sphere" (Calhoun 1992: 424) and Todd Gitlin sees the "unitary public sphere" as "weak, riddled with anxiety and self-doubt" (Gitlin 1998:170). Thus it seems that something

of a consensus has developed around the notion not of one sphere but as a series of smaller overlapping ones- Gitlin's term (1998) is "sphericules" for Dahlgren (1995) it is "many and multi-dimensional public spheres" (see also Gitlin 1998, McNair 2000, Temple 2006 and Gripsrud 2010).

Some of these spheres will reflect policy areas (health, education), some will represent special interests (disabilities, ethnicity, faith groups) and some will have a geographic demarcation. These spheres, or sphericules, I would suggest, are neither discrete between themselves nor do they necessarily have national boundaries; for both the growth of diasporic communities (Silverstone 2006) and the increased role of transnational businesses and international organisations (such as the European Union) have made these smaller spheres overlapping, porous and fragmentary. At the centre of these spheres, or sphericules, is what I interpret to be Dahlgren's political public sphere (Dahlgren 1995:7) - the politicians, the civil servants and the media.

While this characterisation of the political public sphere pre-dates the digital revolution it still holds good today, despite it being much impacted and transformed by the changes in information and communication technology which we have witnessed over the past three decades. There are no longer single conversations taking place within and between the sphericules and the central political public sphere, but instead there is a multitude of cacophonous voices talking and, occasionally, shouting at each other. And the digital revolution has meant that the speed and quantity of information and opinion being publicly exchanged has increased exponentially. But the key question to be addressed relates to the tenor of the discourses, and the resulting policy decisions that flow from them; and that question is: does more information and opinion improve the quality of decision-making and hence the quality of our democracy? The answer relates back to the main theme of this commentary – is there, as Blumler and Gurevitch (1995) termed it "a crisis in public communication"? If the answer is yes then a further question is begged – namely, is the crisis more or less fixed in nature or is it dynamic and, in normative terms, can the direction of travel be seen as positive or negative? Or was there never a crisis in the first place? The items submitted here represent evolving research and commentary around these questions; they represent various manifestations of what I have perceived to be the crisis, going back over the past 30 years. But this commentary is being written in 2013 and there are a number of electronic straws in the wind suggestive of the fact that contemporary political

communications are in the process of dramatically changing, or appearing to change, what Gans (2010) terms the 'democratic conversation', and not necessarily for the worse.

### **Journalists and Politicians**

Lord Justice Leveson's report (Leveson 2012) into the ethics and practices of the British press was primarily focussed on his proposals for regulatory reform of the press as was the debate that followed its publication. However, his report also carried an extensive commentary on the current state of relations between politicians and the media (Gaber 2013B). He concluded his review with a very positive summation of relations between politicians and the media that almost defined the politics/media nexus within a healthy political public sphere:

“..... the overwhelming evidence [is] that relations between politicians and the press on a day to day basis are in robust good health and performing the vital public interest functions of a free press in a vigorous democracy, providing an open forum for public debate, enabling a free flow of information and challenge and holding power to account.” (Leveson 2012: 1117).

Leveson's view is in stark contrast to that expressed by Tony Blair in his valedictory lecture about the state of political journalism in Britain. The former Prime Minister bemoaned what he saw as the media's obsession with controversy and, in particular, their sub-text that, “It is not enough for someone to make an error. It has to be venal. Conspiratorial.” (Blair 2007). And he went on to suggest (in words that very much reflected a view of relations between the press and politics that some contemporary commentators were then propagating (Lloyd 2004)) that “... today's media, more than ever before, hunts in a pack. In these modes it is like a feral beast, just tearing people and reputations to bits.” (Blair 2007). Blair's complaint could be seen as validation of the position of the 'crisis school' – namely that our democratic conversation is discordant and, as a result, the political public sphere is impoverished and, arguably, “not fit for purpose”.<sup>i</sup>

However, the problem with such an argument is that it implies a certain 'golden ageism'. It suggests there was a time when relations between politicians and journalists were healthy, when public trust in politicians was high and the democratic system functioned in good order (Temple 2006). But the actual evidence for this is scant, to say the least. As part of the 1977 Royal Commission on the Press (Finer and McGregor 1977), Seymour-Ure investigated the then state of relations between the Press and Parliament. He began his report by opining that: “The relations of Parliament and the Press are full of tension, mutual suspicion and

political conflict. This is a commonplace." He went on to say, "Newspapers share a golden age myth about the quality and influence of Parliament, particularly in their comments on elections. Parliamentary memoirs [also] suggest a golden age myth about the Press." (Seymour-Ure 1977: 89). Thus the 'crisis-driven' observer needs to tread with some care, for whilst it might well be the case that there never was a 'golden age' it is probably safe to suggest that if things were bad in 1977, they are now, in many ways, worse – worse, that is, in terms of public disillusionment with, and disengagement from, the political process. (However, statements such as this need to be made with care, since the term 'worse' implies a number of normative assumptions so perhaps it might be less problematic to say that today things are just very 'different'.)

Certainly in terms of an apparent decline in public trust in both politicians and the media, it is easy to make the case for a crisis. According to recent Ipsos Mori research, trust in politicians is low and getting lower. Only 14% of those surveyed in 2011 "trusted politicians to tell the truth" and just 19% similarly trusted journalists – even bankers, at 29%, rated more highly. (Ipsos Mori 2011). And, following the MPs expenses scandal of 2009, those believing that MPs did not have a 'high moral code' increased from 35% in 1985 to 59% in 2013 (Murphy 2013). And although too much emphasis should not be placed on such polling it is probably indicative of a longer-term trend in which trust in public institutions, not just in politics and the media, but across a range of fields (religion, the police, the banks), has declined. In more formal terms the decline in public belief in the efficacy of the current system can be tracked against a range of other measures including turnout at elections and membership of political parties. However, a counter argument, using other data, can be made by looking at survey results that indicate, for example, increased public participation in campaigning activities, a rise in membership of special interest groups and a greater willingness to contact MPs and councillors (Stanyer 2004, Hansard Society 2012).

### **Blumler's developing 'crisis in public communication'**

In considering the health of the political public sphere, or Gans' "democratic conversation", I am focussing on the central relationship within that sphere, namely that between journalists and politicians. In writing about this issue I have been much influenced by the work of Blumler and Gurevitch (1995) who pioneered the systemic approach to the study of political communications and were among the first to identify the "Crisis of Public Communication", based on their almost thirty years of observing election coverage at the BBC between 1966

and 1992. When Blumler first began his research about election coverage in the UK he did not perceive of it being in a 'crisis. In one of his first studies he and McQuail (1968) concluded that the political communications system in the UK, as they observed it during the 1964 election, was functioning well, giving the maximum number of citizens the chance to be exposed to the views of the main political parties (Blumler and McQuail 1968: 286). And when Blumler and Gurevitch looked at political communications in the elections of 1983 in the UK election and 1984 in the US (Semetko et al 1991) they compared Britain favourably, noting that in the UK election coverage was less game-orientated, more substantive, gave politicians more scope to set the campaign agenda, less professionalised and that British journalists' attitude to politicians was more "sacerdotal" than "disdainful" – their two principle descriptors. They attributed these positive attributes largely to the existence of a sizeable public service broadcasting sector in the UK which was imbued with what they described as a "civic mission" (Semetko et al. 1991).

However, in the light of their later observations at the BBC, they subsequently revised their verdict on the British system, charting a declining public service broadcasting ethos which they held as being largely responsible for what they were now calling a "crisis" in public communication. They observed that journalists (not just in the BBC) were becoming ever more "disdainful" of politicians in their election coverage. They suggested that journalists viewed politicians and parties through an increasingly cynical lens and saw election coverage more and more in terms of a contest – not between the politicians but between the politicians and the media. In this contest the journalists first sought to decode how the politicians were attempting to gain control of the daily election news agenda and then sought to devise strategies as to how to nullify such manoeuvres (Blumler and Gurevitch 1995: 104). This approach, Blumler and Gurevitch contrasted with what they had described earlier as a more "sacerdotal" approach to election coverage – the notion that journalists, particularly public service broadcasters, had an obligation to provide the fairest election coverage possible as part of the democratic political process (Ibid: 56).

In *The Crisis of Public Communication* Blumler and Gurevitch (1995) observed that as a result of this increase in pragmatic coverage the political communication process was tending to "strain against, rather than with the grain of citizenship" and they warned "our civic arteries are hardening." (Ibid: 203). They described the crisis as involving an ever-increasing cynicism among political reporters - pace the infamous Paxman quote "Why is this lying

bastard lying to me?” (Wells 2005) - an emphasis upon politics as a game played by both sides, an intensification of competition among and between politicians and journalists, an exponential growth in sources of political news and opinion and finally "the emergence of a post-deferential culture” (Blumler and Gurevitch 1995: 206). The consequences of this crisis, as they saw it, was to create a general sense of cynicism about politics among the public, an emphasis on politics as a game rather than as a means of policy formulation and implementation, an exclusion of the public from the political process and a “catapulting” of the press into “a position of surrogate opposition” (Ibid: p. 214).

However, by 2001 Blumler and Gurevitch were starting to wonder whether the digital revolution could, in their words, be “redemptive” because “the Internet allows direct communication between citizens and politicians, enabling both to bypass the media. Here, then, may lie the Internet’s greatest potential for change” (Blumler and Gurevitch 2001). Blumler was, at this stage, conflicted both wondering whether the Internet might not represent some means of transcending the crisis and at the same time seeing the crisis worsening. Writing in 2010, now with Coleman, he appears to see no let-up in the crisis, describing the UK political communications system as ‘bust ...sapping the vitality of democratic political culture.’” (Blumler and Coleman 2010:140) and seeing the media/politics nexus as “a toxic relationship ... [leaving] citizens experiencing increasing unease, confusion, and scepticism.” Ibid). But at the same time suggesting that the new media might be “redemptive” - a means of reinvigorating the political public sphere. He and Coleman call for what they describe as a new kind of public institution - an “online civic commons”. This, they suggest, could enhance the political public sphere and “[do] for democratic citizenship in the digital age what public service broadcasting did for analogue democracy.” Such an institution, they argue, could create a means for journalists, politicians and the public to reconnect, acting as a clearing house for the views of the citizens which should then be promoted and developed as cues for political action at both the local and national level.

### **‘News Intensification’ and the Growth of Spin**

Even if suggestions that the digital revolution is opening up new discursive spaces which might allow ordinary citizens to have a greater voice, might be seen as over-optimistic, these new spaces are, to some extent, having a major impact on the lives and working practices of politicians, journalists and campaigners.<sup>ii</sup> Political journalists’ daily routines are now virtually unrecognisable from those described by media scholars in the middle of the last

century (see Seymour-Ure 1968, Tunstall 1970, Hencke 2011, Gaber 2000, 2011 and 2013a). As a result of the digital revolution a process of ‘news intensification’ - with journalists having more (much more) news and information at their disposal but, at the same time, having to service a whole myriad of new platforms – has been underway (Hencke 2011, Gaber 2011, 2013a and 2013b). Long gone are the days when the gentleman correspondent, sitting in one of Westminster's many bars and watering holes, would glance at his watch at four o'clock in the afternoon and ask himself (and it was almost invariably a ‘him’) "On what am I opining about tonight?"; instead journalists now find themselves serving many, arguably too many, platforms leaving little time for thought, reflection or verification - a state of affairs captured by the *Guardian's* David Hencke, who, when as Chair of the Parliamentary Press Gallery, wrote:

“....while two decades ago a reporter could get away with just one story for next day's issue, now that same reporter can find him or herself with quadruple the amount of work. Not only does the paper's website want an instant story, but it may require a political blog on that story, an update for the next day's paper and a podcast for that evening's refreshed website.”(Hencke 2011: 54).

But there have been other substantive changes taking place in the media, apart from changes in technology, captured by terms such as “dumbing down” (Barnett 1998), “tabloidisation” (Esser 1999), “infotainment” (Franklin 1997) and “churnalism” (Davies 2006). These terms relate both to particular changes, but also suggest a decline in the quality of the information available to the public on the major political issues of the day. And although there is a great deal of evidence to support this argument, some of which is covered in the articles included in this submission, two observations need to be made. The first is that whilst the quality of political information and commentary might have declined, there can be no gainsaying that the actual quantity of information available to the public has never been greater. On a daily basis there has been a marked increase in daily newspaper paginations, the BBC 24-hour radio and TV news channel and Sky News update events on an hourly basis, the political websites diffuse political information minute-by-minute and blogspots and political news pours out of Twitter literally every second.

The other observation is that at the same time as political journalists have been learning how to live with this intensification of news, so too have those on the other side of the wire – the politicians and their media teams. As the demand for political news has increased (if not among audiences certainly in terms of the available time and space to be filled in both the

traditional and new media), so too has the power of the media managers increased as the demand for their 'product' outstrips supply. In one sense this has always been the case in that the sophisticated media managers, or spin doctors, have always known when, and when not, to feed the 'feral beast' of Tony Blair's imaginings. Although as Blair himself conceded they (New Labour) did overplay this particular hand when he wrote: "We paid inordinate attention in the early days of New Labour to courting, assuaging, and persuading the media" (Blair 2005).

Even though there was nothing new in governments seeking to control the media (Lloyd George, a century ago, gave one of the best definitions yet of spin doctoring when he said, "The Press? What you can't square you squash and what you can't squash you square" (Margach 1978: 13)) if one is attempting to delineate the first modern spin doctor one would not start with Alastair Campbell, as many commentators do. Before Campbell there was Margaret Thatcher's astute, and occasionally brutal, press secretary Bernard Ingham and before him, no less astute and no less brutal, was Harold Wilson's Joe Haines. Even further back there was the former journalist Francis Williams who effectively insulated Clement Attlee from any contact with the press but, at the same time, sought to ensure that what coverage there was reflected a positive message about him and his Government. However, it would be tendentious to argue that just because one is able to identify 'spin doctors' of the past, the modern phenomenon of spin amounts only to a difference of degree or sophistication.

Drawing on my own 30 years' experience in and around Westminster<sup>iii</sup>, it is clear that the growth of the spin culture, even before the process of news intensification really gained momentum, was making a profound difference to the day-to-day relations between politicians and journalists. Two examples will suffice. The first relates to my experience as a broadcaster back in the 1970s. In those days if I needed an interview with a particular politician - front or backbencher - I would more often than not simply go and look around the members' lobby of the House of Commons (no mobile phones, or pagers in those days) and make a direct approach, or leave a message for the relevant politician asking him or her to phone me. Now such an approach would be unthinkable. Even the humblest of backbenchers has a team of researchers, secretaries, and even spin doctors, who simultaneously seek to erect a wall around their politician to protect him or her from unwelcome media approaches but also to act as celebrity agents seeking to place their 'star' in as many desirable media

outlets as possible. Requests for interviews – ‘bids’ as they are known in the trade – have to be made through the correct channels and are as frequently turned down as accepted.

The second example relates to the ‘supply’ of political news. Before the advent of the internet, politicians’ main means of communicating with the media was through the printed press release, either delivered by hand, or left on a table in the House of Commons’ Press Gallery. One could stay abreast of almost all political happenings of the day by a daily glance at the press table, turning up for the occasional press conference and attending the twice daily briefings given by the Prime Minister’s Press Secretary. The briefings remain (although they are now also posted online) but virtually everything else has changed. The internet, email, social media and text messaging are now the parties’ and politicians’ principle means of communicating with the media and the flow is unceasing – for example, in just one month (March 2013) the Labour Party posted 131 press releases on its website, an average of more than four a day (Labour 2013). Politicians, or in most cases their staff, now send/spin their own messages, or rebut their opponents’, using new media, on an almost 24/7 basis. The scope for the creative spin doctor is almost unlimited.

### **A Digital Dawn?**

But it would be fallacious to suggest that the degree to which communications between politicians and journalists has been so dramatically transformed in recent years has only changed the relationship between the two by a matter of degree. The change has been substantive and the real question is whether that change has improved or degraded the quality of the democratic conversation and hence the effective functioning of the political public sphere. Certainly there are those scholars of political communication (Norris 2000, McNair 2003) who have argued that the culture of spin has, on the whole, been beneficial to the process of public understanding. They argue that the increased use of techniques of media management by politicians has resulted in greater clarity in their communications, as they, and their advisers, seek to hone a message into language and concepts that are more easily understood by the general public. The process has also, as Sky’s Political Editor, Adam Boulton, has suggested, given journalists greater insight into politicians’ thinking and has also given them a greater flow of authoritative information with which to work, compared to the days of the ubiquitous “no comment” (Boulton 2012).

On the other side of the argument a number of scholars (Barnett and Gaber 2001, Franklin 2004 and Jones 1995, 1999 and 2002) have seen in the greater practice of the so-called ‘dark arts’ of spin, a trend that has enabled politicians to craft messages that conceal as much as they reveal and then to seek to seduce potentially friendly journalists whilst at the same time neutralising potentially hostile ones – in other words ‘spin control’. As I wrote: “One of the most significant developments within the British political system over the past few decades has been the establishment of ‘presentation’ as the central philosophy not just of the practice of politics but of its content as well.” (Barnett and Gaber: 96).

But a more positive argument can be made about the current state of political communications in Britain – one that links to the guarded optimism of Blumler and Coleman (2010) - and that is as follows: that as a result of the digital revolution we could be witnessing not just the beginnings of the end of ‘spin’ but the creation of a more healthy political public sphere. For the democratic conversation, for so long dominated by the voices of the politicians and journalists, can now be joined by literally anybody with access to a computer and an internet connection, resulting in the demarcation lines between mainstream political journalists, politicians and the public (as citizen journalists, campaigners, bloggers and so forth) becoming increasingly blurred. Whilst recognising that an article, and even a blog posting, by an established political correspondent from a traditional newspaper or broadcasting outlet, still has far more impact and influence than the unknown citizen journalist opining on her own personal blogspot, this is increasingly becoming only a matter of degree.

The other notable trend which is changing the balance of power between the old and the new media in the political debate is that it is no longer the case, if it ever was, that the new media is all about opinion whilst the old media are essentially about news - here another blurring is taking place. Ever since the ascendancy of television as the main source of news, newspapers have been retreating from news coverage per se and becoming more reliant on features and opinion as a means of differentiating themselves in a very crowded marketplace (Franklin 1997). Conversely the political blogosphere, which began life in the UK as a space for the opinionated (as opposed to the blogosphere in the US which always had a substantive news-breaking function) has become a growing source of news. Guido Fawkes’ ‘Order Order’<sup>iv</sup> on the right, for instance, and the Huffington Post<sup>v</sup> on the left – contain almost as much news as opinion (which in itself is almost a difference without a distinction, since particular opinions

expressed by particular actors can, in themselves, constitute news). Equally, pronouncements on Conservative Home<sup>vi</sup> – because it is seen to speak authoritatively for the Conservative grassroots - make news in their own right. Twitter, the micro-blogging site, might be dominated by opinion but it is also a site for breaking news and hence has become an indispensable platform for journalists and politicians alike (and for anyone else who wants to monitor political events and opinions) (Gaber 2011). Facebook can also be an invaluable source of non-mainstream political news. One very minor example was the announcement of the formation of a ‘Friends of Israel in UKIP’ group<sup>vii</sup> and the debate that followed (the Group being seen as a possible ‘distraction’ from UKIP’s main focus). This would not have registered on any mainstream journalist’s radar, no matter how focused on the minutiae of British politics he or she was, were it not for a Facebook posting by the group. The posting also told us that the existence of the group had provoked the far-right British National Party to denounce UKIP for ‘selling out to the Zionist lobby’<sup>viii</sup> – an example of one of those slightly exotic ‘flowers’ of political information that only grows within the walls of the digital walled garden.

So all this digital activity begs the question: can one reconcile this massive tidal wave of news, information and opinion with the notion formulated early in the last century by John Dewey who suggested that the “cultivation of a culture of communication” should form the basis of a civilised democratic discourse (Dewey 1927)? Some scholars (Dutton 1996, Davies 1999) have suggested that cyberspace is no place for nurturing such a culture, but as Blumler and Gurevitch noted, users of new technologies begin to “adjust their behaviour in line with what are perceived to be the medium’s distinctive characteristics” (Blumler and Gurevitch 2001: 5) – and there is more recent work to support such an argument.

Zizi Papacharissi has investigated the tone and texture of the online democratic conversation and concluded that it was more “civil” than anecdotal evidence might suggest. She looked at the competing claims of, on the one hand, those who might be characterised as cyber-utopians, who suggest that the online environment offers a discursive space that increases political participation and, in her words could “pave the road for a democratic utopia” (Papacharissi 2004: 260) against the claims of the cyber-dystopians who say that political discussion on social media is “fragmented, nonsensical and enraged” (ibid). She looked at the extent to which online debate could be described as “civil” by investigating 300 such debates and found, perhaps surprisingly, that amid the shouting and screaming - and contrary to the

anecdotal evidence - most of the posted messages were in fact “civil”. She suggests that this is because cyberspace does not involve face-to-face communication. She claims that her study “supported the internet’s potential to revive the public sphere” (ibid: 280).

There is other evidence to hand that also suggests the first flowerings of an electronic user-generated democracy. The media, particularly the broadcasters, have long realised the attraction to audiences of providing spaces of interactivity – call-in shows on radio attract some of the largest audiences. But when this media interactivity is combined with social media, the power of electronic public opinion to shift issues onto both the media’s and the politicians’ agendas can be impressive. One example came in 2013 with the appointment of Paulo Di Canio, a man with a background of support for fascism, as manager of Sunderland football club. It very rapidly became a major mainstream and new media issue. Within hours of his appointment being announced supporters of Sunderland, and others, swamped the phone-in lines, the blogs, the Twitter feeds and the Facebook postings to protest. This would have been a major story in its own right but the speed, intensity (and quality) of the public online response made it impossible for the football club to suggest that this was something only of interest to the media and completely irrelevant to the average Sunderland supporter. Similarly, the death of Lady Thatcher in 2013 witnessed a public debate about her legacy, on the old and new media, which only the cynical could dismiss as a mere cacophony of voices.

A few years ago it might have been tempting to dismiss the online debates and discussions as being confined to relatively small groups of techno-savvy obsessives, but that line is now difficult to hold. Latest figures suggest that 40% of the UK adult population now access news digitally on mobile devices, the highest rate in Europe (Dutton and Black 2011), that two thirds of UK consumers now visit at least one social media site every day (Ofcom 2011) and 60% of all internet users in the UK maintain some form of online profile - the highest penetration rates for social networks anywhere in the world (Newman 2011). Hence, the growth of social media might just signal the beginnings of the fulfilment of Habermas’s notion of “universal access to the public sphere” that scholars have identified as critical to its realisation (Schlesinger and Tumber: 9).

And it is not just one way traffic on the information super highway - more and more politicians are now listening and responding to voices from cyberspace. Not so many years ago any politician who took the trouble to draft a press release, even hand-written, and take it

up to the Westminster press gallery, was regarded as almost a cutting edge communicator. Today the majority of MPs use social media, often as their main form of public communication, with Twitter the fastest growing medium. As of March 2013 409 out of 650 MPs had Twitter accounts, compared with 331 the year before and 51 in the year before that.<sup>ix</sup> Though as I have pointed out<sup>x</sup> just because an MP has a Twitter account, it does not mean that they can be considered active users of the service (Margaretten and Gaber 2012). Usage can vary enormously. A recent paper from the Parliament Street think tank discovered that one MP – Di Havad - had just 56 followers and had yet to tweet (as of April 2013); on the other hand another – Tom Watson MP – had over 90,000 followers and sometimes tweeted up to 40 times a day<sup>xi</sup>.

Twitter might be one way of reversing some of the negative trends that have been discussed in this commentary. In a jointly authored paper with Margaretten, we wrote:

“Crisis scholars generally hold that the rift between the public and politicians threatens democracy, and they look towards the ability of Computer Mediated Communications (CMCs) to expand and redefine the public sphere as a means of addressing mistrust and reversing the trend towards a widespread de-legitimising of democratic institutions” (Margaretten and Gaber 2012: 2).

Whilst CMCs might be one way of improving the quality of the discourse within the political public sphere we warned that it was a far from universal panacea. However, for scholars of political communication, it could prove to be an invaluable resource, as we noted:

“Twitter’s brief and data-driven nature, when combined with its growing ubiquity and increased adoption by elected officials, creates an extraordinary opportunity for academics to study political messaging, both for its discursive elements and what it can tell us about the behaviour of politicians. It is a valuable resource that scholars of political communication should now be looking to exploit.” (Ibid: 19).

It is appropriate to be cautious when hailing the arrival of ‘a new dawn’ (in Tony Blair’s memorable phrase on the morning of his 1997 election victory) as Blumler and Gurevitch (2001: 6) observed, “Politicians and their publicity advisers will certainly not be automatically cleansed of their original communication sins just by the advent of the new media!”. But there are other straws in the electronic wind – in addition to the research findings discussed above – that are suggestive that even if the new dawn hasn’t yet broken, the darkness of the night is beginning to fade. Liberal Democrat MP Tom Brake was first elected to the Commons in 1997, he is now Deputy Leader of the House of Commons and a Facebook enthusiast. He boasts of having 5,000 followers (almost a quarter of his actual vote)

and fervently believes that social media are having a major impact on the quality of British democracy. Writing for the *Huffington Post*, Brake (2013) says that, for him, social media is a vital tool for reaching his constituents. He believes it has made him a better MP and has also forced him to rethink how he engaged with local people; as a result he has modified his behaviour, taking into account that his constituents see themselves just as much as ‘consumers’ as ‘voters’. And the experience has reinforced his belief that people will engage with politics but only if the political debate is pitched to them in terms that they find accessible (Brake 2013).

Brake’s enthusiasm for social media might be premature but, for those of us who have been writing about and pondering, the crisis in political communication, it certainly provides, at the very least, pause for thought, if not radical revision. As Blumler and Gurevitch predicted:

“...the Internet allows direct communication between citizens and politicians, enabling both to bypass the media. Here, then, may lie the Internet’s greatest potential for change. After widespread new media diffusion, the relations of politicians, audiences and the ‘old media’ may not be quite the same as before.” (Blumler and Gurevitch 2001).

## CHAPTER TWO

### METHODOLOGY

In preparing this commentary I was struck by Schudson's methodological observation which, in terms of my own reflections as a practitioner, has a particular acuity. On the one hand he talks about how: "It is part of the scholar's job to blaze a usable trail through complexity" (Schudson 2008:3) and on the other, recognises his own (and other scholars') limitations when he describes his task as:

"... to try to know the world of journalism not as journalists know it, but with what journalists know about it in mind and how journalists experience their work and their world view. I try to picture how a question looks from the perspective of a reporter in the field or the editor in the newsroom" (Ibid: 8).

I am fortunate to have no such limitation - I don't have to "try and picture how a question looks from the perspective of a reporter" - I am, or at least have been, one. Hence, one of my main methodological approaches has been to utilise my own professional background to undertake either current or retrospective observational or experiential research. I have used this approach to investigate a number of issues including the coverage of international news (Gaber 1981, 1997 and 2001), the media management techniques of the political parties, (Gaber 2000, 2001, 2005a and 2007) the dynamics of election reporting (Gaber 2006, 2011 and 2013c) and the culture and working practices of the Westminster lobby (Gaber 1992 and 2013a).

Observational research tends to be divided into one of three types – covert, overt and participatory. All three have advantages and disadvantages. Covert research avoids the problem of the research subjects being affected by the process of observation but can raise ethical issues. Overt observation raises fewer ethical issues but does present problems of behaviour modification by the group being studied. Participant observation is closest to the procedure I am characterising as 'concurrent experiential' and overcomes the difficulties identified above but is also not without its problems. Most notably, if one is both researching and at the same time engaged in professional journalistic practice, as is the case with a number of the studies being submitted, one does not necessarily have a holistic perspective. For example, my analysis of international news flows (Gaber 1981) was based on my experience of allocating news stories to broadcasters in Africa and Asia. However, at the time did not have a daily knowledge of the factors influencing either the selection of the stories to

be covered in the first place, nor how the stories I had selected for distribution were actually used at the end point. I had some acquaintance with the processes and could make what I took to be reasonable assumptions but, in the final analysis, I could not claim to have had either an overview, nor distance from the process. In the case of the research involving a degree of retrospective reflexivity<sup>xii</sup>, not only are there the problems outlined above, but there is also the challenge of accurate recall and awareness of contemporary changes in professional journalistic practice.

In addition to the experiential research method I have also used a number of other methodologies. In seeking to analyse the influence of television on the select committee system (Gaber 1992) I used both survey and interview methodologies. Surveys can be highly problematic unless one has a clear idea of what one is seeking to achieve. In this instance the research was seeking to utilise a quantitative methodology but not one based on sampling. The 1992 research was based on two almost wholly reliable sampling frames (not always the case) namely, all the journalists listed on the website of the Parliamentary Press Gallery and all MPs listed on the Hansard website as members of select committees. All were sent email questionnaires which were followed up with three reminders. As a result, response rates of 30 per cent and 53 per cent respectively were achieved. Since these tend to be groups that receive a plethora of survey requests these rates were regarded as sufficiently robust to form the basis of our generalisations. This assumption could be made because we were able to discover enough information about the non-respondents from the sampling frame to establish that they did not differ markedly from the respondents. Most survey methodologies involve some degree of sampling and the key issue, sometimes neglected, is the validity and usefulness of the original sampling frame, particularly the extent to which it enables a comparison to be drawn between respondents and non-respondents. A relatively low response rate, but one drawn from a robust and detailed sampling frame, with adequate information about non-respondents, enables one to make generalisations about the overall population being sampled with a degree of confidence. Surveys with higher rates of response, but drawn from unreliable sampling frames and with scant knowledge about non-respondents, provides a less reliable basis for generalisations. In this research journalists' gender, media outlets and length of time accredited to the Press Gallery could be established; for the MPs their gender, age, party affiliations, constituencies and their length of committee service could be established.

Focus group research is now ubiquitous, but frequently misunderstood. I have used it sparingly because it is a useful but limited methodology. In (Gaber 1996) I criticised those who saw focus groups as a viable alternative to a properly conducted poll: "... there are no grounds for believing that a sample of half-a-dozen people meeting in a sitting room in Edgware is a more accurate reflection of the views of the British electorate than a properly drawn sample of one or two thousand from across the UK.", I wrote in a not-so-veiled criticism of the research methods adopted by Tony Blair's former polling adviser Phillip Gould (criticism I extended in one of the submitted items (Gaber 2005a)).

The other research method I have made significant use of is content analysis which I used when analysing media coverage of congestion charging (Gaber 2005b), changing television news agendas (Barnett et al 2000 and Barnett et al 2012) and coverage of the Israel/Palestine dispute (Gaber 2009). With content analysis the key issue is one of coding and how robust the coding frame proves to be. In my experience the only satisfactory way of establishing the utility and coherence of a frame is by undertaking pilot studies using double-blind coders. If one finds a high degree of agreement between coders – generally over 80% of the unit being coded – then one can be reasonably confident that the frame is reliable. Anything less means revisiting the frame and seeking to establish where the problematic areas lie (Cho 2008).

In my content analysis work I found Entman's work on framing and priming particularly useful (Entman 1993). I used this approach in my analysis of the media coverage of the introduction of the London congestion charge (Gaber 2005b). I was able to demonstrate how the media framed their approach to the introduction in terms of "Red Ken and the Loony Left" ride again. The use of this frame was particularly noticeable for the frequency of its use by the main right wing newspapers – the *Sun*, the *Daily Mail* and the *Daily Telegraph*. It was also much used by the London *Evening Standard* which spearheaded the unsuccessful campaign against the charge.

However, I believe that the approach I developed – combining framing with a film studies approach – which I used to analyse television news coverage of the Israel/Hezbollah War in 2006 was innovative and worthy of further utilisation. I was seeking to overcome some of the inadequacies of the basic framing approach – namely that frames are rarely 'exclusive' in that there is often a degree of overlap between them, hence questions can arise as to how defined the frame might appear to the audience. The second inadequacy to be overcome is

that the framing approach can mar the overall perspective, in other words it can focus the researcher's attention too greatly on particular frames, so that he or she can miss the wood for the trees. Hence, I argued that a framing approach was necessary, but not sufficient, when evaluating allegations of bias. I wrote at the time:

“A news frame can appear to be, and can indeed be, neutral. For example, a story about efforts to achieve a ceasefire at the UN might tell us very little about from whose perspective the story was being framed.” (Gaber 2011).

I did this by combining a framing analysis with the film studies notion of 'authorship' which, by decoding the words and pictures, seeks to reveal who audiences would perceive to be the 'dominant voice' of a particular scene or sequence. The technique seeks to answer the question, at any particular point in the narrative, whose point of view (POV) is the auteur invoking, and how is it being perceived by the audience? If one asked the news broadcasters the first question – whose voice were they invoking - they would undoubtedly deny that they were invoking any 'voice' other than their own, and would, in turn stress that their sole preoccupation was their statutory obligations of impartiality and balance. However, if one asked the audience a similar question one would well might hear a different response.

Without the resources to undertake any quantitative audience research I had to develop a methodology that would provide a, more or less, objective measurement of the likely assignation of POV that an audience would perceive to be dominant in any particular news report. Using two researchers, and working on the basis of double-blind coding, it was possible to establish that, for the most part, identifying a dominant POV for each item was not hugely problematic. We found that there was no disagreement between the coders about establishing a POV for around 80% of the material analysed. That left 20% which, rather than seek to negotiate, was coded as 'no discernible POV' and was thus not included in the overall POV totals. In this way I was content that I had discovered a means of analysing the coverage that provided both qualitative and quantitative insights that was robust but also gave tone and texture to the analysis.

In this research I also made use of comparative methodology. I was originally asked to evaluate the BBC's coverage of the Israel/Hezbollah war against the BBC's own editorial guidelines as a measure of bias (Gaber 2009). I did not believe that this was sufficient for the purpose since it implied that if the BBC's coverage was in line with its own guidelines then, ipso facto, it was unbiased. I chose a different approach involving both a content analysis,

outlined above, and a comparison with coverage on ITV. This latter methodology, of course, did not directly address the bias issue but it did provide a benchmark to measure BBC's coverage against. I believed that whether I found the BBC's coverage to be biased or not, without the ability to say that either a similar judgement could, or could not, be made against ITV News, was an important calibration to make. In the event, because of the comparative method, I was able to conclude, with some confidence, that the BBC's coverage of the conflict was, if anything, fairer (to both sides) than the coverage on ITV News (Gaber 2009).

I also made use of the comparative method when investigating the working practices of political journalists, both during election campaigns and at Westminster (Gaber 2011 and 2013a). For the ongoing Political Communications book series (published after every General Election) I was asked to look at how the experience of reporting elections had changed over time; for this I compared the working day of the political reporter in 2010 with his counterpart the last time Labour was ejected from office in 1979. This historical comparison demonstrated just how dramatic these changes had been, both in terms of the information available to reporters and the number of media platforms they were expected to service (Gaber 2011). In looking at the impact of the MPs' expenses scandal on the Westminster lobby, rather than simply observing and making assumptions about the contemporary lobby, I compared its functioning and membership with how it was documented by two distinguished scholars forty years ago (see Seymour-Ure 1968, Tunstall 1970). This gave me a quasi-longitudinal perspective which enabled me to draw out vital differences between the lobby then and now. Through this approach I was able to make, what I believe to be the key finding: that it was the reduction in the number of regional political correspondents at Westminster which was one of the main explanatory factors as to why MPs' abuse of their expenses was not so readily apparent to the members of the lobby in 2009. (Gaber 2013a).

## CHAPTER THREE

### COMMENTARY ON THE FOLLOWING SUBMITTED ITEMS

#### 1. NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL NEWS AGENDAS

'The Media and the Third World' (1981) *Multiracial Education* (1981)

'The View from the Newsrooms of the UK and the International Agencies' in *Environmentalism and the Mass Media: the North South Divide* Chapman G. Fraser C. Gaber I and Kumar, K, (1997).

#### 2. PARLIAMENT, POLITICIANS AND THE MEDIA

'Committees on Camera: MPs and Lobby Views on the Effects of Televising Commons Select Committees' in *Parliamentary Affairs* (1992)

'Government by spin: an analysis of the process' in *Media Culture and Society* (2000)

*Westminster Tales: the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Crisis in Political Journalism*, (with Barnett S.) (2001)  
Chapter 8 Controlling the Whitehall machine  
Chapter 9 The Changing Reporting Culture

'Too much of a good thing: the 'problem' of political communications in a mass media democracy' in the *Journal of Public Affairs* (2007)

'The Lobby in transition: what the 2009 MPs expenses scandal revealed about the changing relationship between politicians and the Westminster lobby' *Media History* (2013)

'Rupert and the Three Card Trope – What You See Ain't Necessarily What You Get' *Media Culture and Society* (2012)

'Two and a Half Cheers for Leveson' in *After Leveson: the Future of British Journalism* (eds. Keble and Mair) (2013)

#### 3. ELECTION COVERAGE

'Dislocated and Distracted: Media, Parties and the Voters in the 2005 General Election Campaign' *British Politics* (2006)

'The Hollowed-out Election; or where did all the policy go' (2013) *Journal of Political Marketing* (2013)

'The Transformation of Campaign Reporting: the 2010 UK General Election, Revolution or Evolution?' in *Political Communication in Britain: The Leader debates, the Campaign and the Media in the 2010 General Election* Wring D. et al (eds.) (2011)

#### 4. BIAS AND REPRESENTATION

*Culture Wars: the media and the British Left* with Curran J. and Petley J Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press (2005)

Chapter 7 'Slaying the Dragon'

Chapter 8 'Driven to Distraction'

'Is the BBC Biased: the Corporation and the Coverage of the 2006 Israeli-Hezbollah War' (2009) in *Journalism, Theory, Practice and Criticism* (2009)

'Three cheers for subjectivity: or the crumbling of the seven pillars of traditional journalistic wisdom' in *The End of Journalism?* Charles A and Stewart G. eds. Peter Lang (2010)

(In the commentary that follows I have sought to highlight what I believe to be the key findings and insights of the submitted work. I have sought to organise the submissions along the following five broad thematic lines: National and International News Agendas, Parliament, Politicians and the Media, Changing Coverage of Elections and Issues of Bias and Representation.)

##### **National and International News Agendas**

1. 'The Media and the Third World' (1981) *Multiracial Education* (1981)
2. "The View from the Newsrooms of the UK and the International Agencies" in *Environmentalism and the Mass Media: the North South Divide* Chapman G. Fraser C. Gaber I and Kumar, K, (1997)

My journalistic career began in the field of international news and hence, almost inevitably, this was the first area in which I developed a scholarly interest. The two articles submitted here – the imbalance in news resources between the 'first' and the 'third' world and the growing problem of the degradation of the earth's environment, had (and still have) strong normative overtones which formed part of my motivation in researching and writing about such subjects and is reflected in the work submitted.

The first item – published in 1981 - now appears to me to be somewhat prescient. Long before I was familiar with either the notion of a 'crisis in public communications' or the ideas that were later to form the core of Habermas (1989) and Castells (2008) writings, and even before the publication of the controversial McBride report for UNESCO (McBride 1980)<sup>xiii</sup>, I was already grappling with the problems arising from the globalisation of news. This article represents an articulation of my concerns about the imbalances in international news flows

that I perceived were distorting the global public sphere. My concerns had come into sharp focus when working as a desk editor for Visnews (later to become Reuters TV) in London – where part of my role was deciding what international news coverage should be sent to TV stations in Africa and Asia. This article - 'The Media and the Third World' - published in *Multiracial Education* (1981) was written at a time when there was some expectation that the work on international news flows, then being undertaken by UNESCO, might develop into positive steps in terms of ameliorating the distortions in news resources between the North and the South. The article represented the start of my concerns about news agenda setting and representation, although at the time I was unaware of the academic debates surrounding these issues. My methodological approach was almost entirely experiential reflexivity.

The article begins by identifying the crucial role played by the international news agencies – an area only then recently opened up to scholarship (Tunstall 1977 and Boyd-Barrett 1980). Second, it linked to debates about the imbalance in the flow of news between the North and the South (McBride 1980). Third, it articulated the problem of how Africa was being represented in the wider world - something that has been much written about in the intervening years but was then a new topic for discussion, as the special issue of *Multiracial Education* represents. And I had no awareness of notions of the 'manufacture of news' then being developed by the Birmingham School (Cohen and Young 1981, Cohen 1972) when I wrote,

“... the bulk of the news “extracted” from the Third World has been originated, processed and distributed by Western based organisations with their own Western perspectives on what is, and what is not, important.” (Gaber 1981: 104).

Equally I had no formal knowledge of the concepts of either agenda-setting (McCombs 2004) or representation (Hall 1978) when I observed how, in the main, the Western media tended to convey negative images about Africa:

“... news is focused on dramatic and extreme events. Famines, floods, earthquakes and so on all ‘good copy’ that is consonant with the developed world’s view of what the Third World is all about. For these stories, particularly where television coverage is obtainable, show the third world as backward, helpless and almost totally dependent on beneficent Western aid.” (Gaber 1981: 106).

Based on my own knowledge I constructed an imaginary narrative about how, as a result of the competition between the international agencies, a news report from Tanzania could become transformed from a speech about agriculture to a potential casus belli. From this I theorised, in a way that pre-dated Entman’s seminal article (1993), and equally unaware of

Goffman's work (1994) which established framing as a central concept within media and communications scholarship:

“It (the narrative) demonstrates how events in the Third World country are often forced into a framework constructed by journalists working in the West – and it's because of this framework that only a limited number of Third World stories are ever categorised as ‘news’” (Gaber 1981: 106).

I concluded by suggesting that simply handing control of the flow of international news from the media elites, who ran the international agencies, to the governing elites in newly independent countries - as was then being mooted - would not necessarily result in improvements in either representations of the South in the developed world, nor a more balanced flow of news from the North – a warning that the passage of time has fully justified. As McBride said:

“Today, virtually no one disputes the reality of this imbalance. There is no general agreement, however, about concrete applications of the concept, still less about remedies to the problem and desirable policies.” (McBride: 28).

As a result of my interest in global news flows, contrasting national and international news agendas and the differences in representation between developed and less developed countries, I was invited to join an ESRC-funded project<sup>xiv</sup> which sought to investigate how the notion of the 'environment' was differently perceived, and represented, in developed and developing countries – with the UK and India as the case studies. This resulted in a co-authored book *Environmentalism and the Mass Media: the North South Divide* (Chapman et al 1997).

In terms of my own contribution, I focussed on seeking to understand how and why the global public sphere was failing to address the issue of climate change. Media representations of both the issue, and its potential solutions, varied widely between countries of the North and South – as Gurevitch, Levy and Roeh put it: “The Global Newsroom is still confronted by a Tower of Babel” (1991: 215). And although this book was published more than 15 years ago the problems it identified remain at the heart of the global debate around the environment, particularly as the Chinese and Indian economies have continued to expand which in turn has increased the threat to the planet's sustainability.

From my own perspective my work on this project enabled me to dovetail my interest in the global news agenda with a more domestic focus on the prominence, and lack of it, that the environment as a news category attracted. My main contribution to the book was a

production study entailing both newsroom observation and interviews with more than 30 environmental reporters, editors and news editors. These included journalists working for the major UK print and broadcast outlets, and also those working for Reuters, CNN in Atlanta, Associated Press in New York and the Asian Broadcasting Union in Kuala Lumpur. The aim was to try and establish how, and why, certain news stories about the environment gained media prominence whilst other, equally significant, stories did not. In other words, I was hoping to shed light on one of the key issues within the agenda setting debate – whose agenda leads – the media's, the politicians', the NGOs' or the public's? This very much related to the debate about primary definers (Hall 1978) and Hall's critics who accepted the broad-brush notion he advanced but argued that the role of primary definers was far more contested than Hall had allowed for (Schlesinger and Tumber 1994).

In addition to informing this debate, the chapter gave insights into newsroom practices that I was able to contribute as a result of my insider's knowledge and experience. I used this knowledge to look at agenda-setting debates not, as many studies had done, through the prism of media/source relations or the media/public nexus, but by looking at the relationships between environmental reporters and their news editors. These relationships, I found, to be informed by both sides' perceptions of their imagined audiences, a not dissimilar approach to that adopted by Gans in his study of gatekeepers (Gans 1979).

I began by outlining the mechanics of a typical newsroom, highlighting the crucial role played by competition; that is competition not just between media outlets, but also between reporters within the same news organisation. Through these interviews it became clear that the environment, as a news category, had a marginality compared to more traditional news categories. I suggested that this was because it was a relatively new subject area and, as a result, did not have many 'champions' at senior levels within the editorial process. Indeed, it was often perceived as a slightly quirky topic, perhaps of interest only to a very specialised audience. Hence, running such stories ran the risk of being seen as 'campaigning' – a word with strong negative connotations for many mainstream journalists. I broached the issue of impartiality by asking my respondents about the degree to which they saw themselves as both journalists and environmental campaigners. The vast majority firmly rejected the notion that they were anything but impartial observers – "We do not crusade ...we're not joining anyone's movement" (Gaber 1997: 38) one told me.

In discussing how a newsroom's notion of news agendas developed I highlighted the crucial role played by the news editor (the City Editor in Gans' 1979 study) as the key gatekeeper, and how the agenda-building process developed through the ongoing tensions between the reporters and news editors, another characteristic identified by Gans. "News desks can't see further than the end of their noses" (Gaber 1997: 38) the *Guardian's* environmental reporter told me. In investigating how the reporters themselves made decisions about which stories they thought worth pursuing, I encountered some classic definitions of news. The *Daily Telegraph's* foreign editor talked about the importance of there being "identifiable goodies and baddies...an element of conflict... [and] transparency, readers have to be able to get to grips with the story." (Ibid: 40). Tension and conflict was identified by many respondents and, unsurprisingly, those working in television stressed the importance of "stunning pictures" (Ibid: 41). Though this also linked to an important inhibitor of environmental coverage - the prohibitive costs associated with covering climate change-related events in remote locations.

A central part of my analysis – and this partly influenced my future scholarly trajectory – was an investigation into the relationship between the media's, and the politicians', news agendas. The conventional popular wisdom – then and now – is that in this duality the media play the decisive role. The *Sun's* famous, or infamous, headline after the Conservatives' surprise election victory in 1992 summed this up when it boasted "It's the Sun Wot Won It". Twenty years on a similar view was heard from Tony Blair in the previously cited speech when he talked about how politicians were now "profoundly accountable, daily, through the media" (Blair 2007). Whilst there is widespread acceptance of the notion developed by the agenda-setting theorists, that the media "don't tell us what to think but they do tell us what to think about" (Ruddock 2007: 41), I would suggest that the situation is more nuanced than this quotation suggests. First, because the power, if it does exist, to "tell us what to think about" ultimately leads to the power to "tell us what to think". If, for example, the press campaigns relentlessly about the difficulties presented by surges in immigration, it can be of little surprise if public opinion begins to perceive immigration as a problem that needs tackling, presumably by limiting numbers coming into the country.

Second, that over time there are identifiable shifts in the balance of power and influence between the media and the political class which can, and do, result in the direction of influence shifting; this depends on a range of contextual and substantive factors. In this

particular research I was able to demonstrate that, as far as coverage of environmental issues in the late eighties was concerned, there was a measurable movement, in terms of issue saliency, that went from the political arena to the media; although that is not to say that this direction of flow is immutable and generalisable for all times and in all circumstances.

In the chapter I identified a speech made by the Prime Minister of the day, Margaret Thatcher, in September 1988, as a crucial moment in establishing the saliency of the environment as a news category. Her speech subsequently became characterised as the moment when she cast off her mantle as ‘the iron lady’ to become ‘the green goddess’ (Gaber 1997: 43) - declaring herself a convert to environmentalism. Correspondents recalled this event as a transformative moment; but the reality was that at the time it was barely reported. In her memoirs Mrs Thatcher’s recalled that there was so little interest in a speech on the environment that not a single television crew turned up to record it; indeed, the absence of TV lights forced her to read the speech with the aid of a candelabra and made her reluctantly don her rarely publicly-seen spectacles (Thatcher 1993: 43).

The environmental journalists I interviewed accepted that, following the speech, their numbers increased but they were reluctant to concede that their organisations’ news priorities could be influenced by a political intervention. They attributed the increase in environmental correspondents, not to Mrs Thatcher’s speech, but to two environmental stories that preceded it – one involving a ‘plague’ that affected North Sea seals (a visual story which was not too expensive to cover) and the refusal of UK port authorities to allow a foreign ship to dock that was carrying toxic waste (again cheap, local and visual). In fact these stories happened several weeks before Mrs Thatcher’s speech, and whilst these events might have influenced Mrs Thatcher, it was the speech itself and the coverage that followed it, that appeared to have made the environment a major subject of public discussion.

Prior to the speech there had been just two specialist environmental correspondents working in the national media, in the months after this figure climbed to 12. And the environment remained an important news category throughout the following year until the Green Party achieved a surprising 15% of the popular vote in the 1989 European Elections; this caused Mrs Thatcher to do an about-turn and seek to put the green genie back in the political bottle. The impact on the environmental reporting lobby was dramatic – within a few months their numbers in the national media had shrunk back to four.

## **Parliament, Politicians and the Media**

1. “Committees on Camera: MPs and Lobby Views on the Effects of Televising Commons Select Committees” in *Parliamentary Affairs* (1992)
2. “Government by spin: an analysis of the process” in *Media Culture & Society* (2000)
3. *Westminster Tales: the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Crisis in Political Journalism*, (with Barnett S.) (2001)  
Chapter 8 Controlling the Whitehall machine  
Chapter 9 The Changing Reporting Culture
4. ‘Too much of a good thing: the ‘problem’ of political communications in a mass media democracy’ in the *Journal of Public Affairs* (2007)
5. “The Lobby in transition: what the 2009 MPs expenses scandal revealed about the changing relationship between politicians and the Westminster lobby” *Media History* (2013)
6. “Rupert and the Three Card Trope – What You See Ain't Necessarily What You Get” *Media Culture and Society* (2012)
7. “Two and a Half Cheers for Leveson” in *After Leveson: the Future of British Journalism* (eds. Keble and Mair) (2013)

As discussed above, the focus of my research into the coverage of environmental news was on the agenda-setting power of politicians; this was probably not unconnected with the fact that, following my time spent as an international journalist, I then moved into the political arena. In 1989 I guided the independent production company I had helped establish (Seven Day Productions) in its successful bid to win the first-ever franchise to televise the committees of the Houses of Commons and Lords. It was whilst overseeing this operation that I observed how, despite politicians' and journalists' protestations to the contrary, the television cameras appeared to be having a significant impact on the standing and influence of the House of Commons' select committees. Hence, with a colleague (Steven Barnett), I conducted research among both MPs and journalists, which resulted in the publication of “Committees on Camera: MPs and Lobby Views on the Effects of Televising Commons Select Committees” in *Parliamentary Affairs*. This looked at how the televising had affected the behaviour and attitudes both of members of the committees and of the journalists covering them at Westminster.

The research involved postal surveys of all MPs who were members of select committees and all members of the Parliamentary Press Gallery. The response rates from these two groups –

53% and 30% respectively – were highly satisfactory, given that political journalists and MPs are notoriously resistant to being ‘researched’. This quantitative material was supplemented by in-depth interviews with both press and broadcasting journalists and editorial executives. Previous research (Hetherington et al 1990 and Franklin 1992) had identified that, following the start of the televising of Parliament in 1989, there had been an increase in media coverage of its deliberations. But neither piece of research attempted any sort of evaluation of the impact this increased coverage might be having on perceptions of political power and influence. As we wrote at the time:

“Even conceptually, it is difficult to disentangle the complex interrelationships which eventually determine whether television has an impact. Our aim in this article is simply to offer evidence which may inform a continuing debate.” (Barnett and Gaber: 1992: 411).

Based on the survey responses received, we concluded that the impact of television on the select committees had been to significantly increase their political influence – if not their actual constitutional power. We adduced three main ways in which this influence had increased. First, through the educational impact of the televising i.e. the public, the press and others were gaining a better understanding of the role of the committees (these were a relatively new innovation having been introduced, in their current form, only in 1979). Second, television was making the committees more effective. This was because ministers and other witnesses, aware of being televised, now prepared themselves more thoroughly for the grilling and this made the committees’ deliberations that much more informed. The third impact we termed ‘accountability’, as one MP told us: “The televising of select committees is the most effective aspect of the televising of Parliament. There is nowhere to hide and this seems to me to be genuine public accountability.” (Ibid: 413).

One other of our research findings, which links to my earlier argument about the strategic importance of the news desk as the main gatekeeper, was that whilst broadcast journalists were more positive about the impact the televising was having on their own output, print journalists reported that this was only the case when they found themselves asked to follow up committee stories that they had originally chosen to ignore but had been seen by their newsdesks on television. As we wrote at the time

“Their [the committees’] coverage on TV raises their profile with newsrooms and with senior executives who spend much of their time watching TV and get interested in what they see.” (Ibid: 417)

But despite concluding that television had significantly increased the influence of the committees in the ways elaborated above, we also concluded that it had not resulted in the enhanced role originally mapped out for them by the reformers of the 1970s – that of giving Parliament a greater measure of control over the executive. Our conclusion was that as the committees came to recognise that their role was one of influence rather than power then television coverage:

“... [would act] as a catalyst to transform the nature and role of select committees from a monitoring system to a system of influence through accountability, efficiency and education. It may be that constitutionally there is little in common with the American model of congressional committees. But the publicity effects will not be dissimilar. And it may not be long before real power will finally accrue via the lever of television's publicity. (Ibid: 419).

In the light of the enhanced public profile now regularly achieved by select committees investigating high salience issues - such as the role of the banks in the financial crisis, corporate tax avoidance and the phone hacking affair - it would be appropriate to observe that our predictions of 1993 have been very substantially fulfilled.

Whilst committees were of increasing importance in Parliament, it was the growing impact of 'spin' that most captured my concern whilst I was working at Westminster as a television and radio journalist. An article I wrote for *Media, Culture and Society* (Gaber 2000) reflected both my scholarly interests but also what I had observed, at first hand - namely the transformation in political/media relations between the years of John Major's Government and the election of New Labour. It was a transformation that moved from Conservative lassitude to the robust, bordering on aggressive, stance of the incoming Blair administration. The insights that I gained from this experience prompted me to seek to deconstruct these changes, and also to express my concern about the impact these changes were having on the practice of political journalism and their potentially negative impact on the political public sphere. My concern was stimulated, not just by my experience as a practitioner, but by the pronouncements of Tony Blair's then press secretary, Alastair Campbell. These were crystallised by a comment, which to some might have appeared innocuous, that he made to a Commons' committee investigating government public relations:

“In opposition we made clear that communications was not something that you tagged on the end, it is part of what you do. That is something that we have tried to bring into government.” (Select Committee on Public Administration 1999: 507).

I was apprehensive that this emphasis on communications – which in shorthand came to be referred to as spin - was having a distorting effect on the entire political process, a fear that was also reflected by the Committee Chair, Tony Wright, a former Political Science academic, whom I quoted thus:

“They [politicians] like to be thought well of and want to control the message and the messengers as far as possible. There is nothing new or even disreputable about this [spin]: it comes with the job. What is new though is the systematic and professional way in which it is now undertaken..... The practitioners of these black arts are increasingly the key figures in the political world.” (Wright, 1999: 20).

As part of my commitment to using my professional experience to assist in the scholarly analysis of media/politics relations I sought to de-construct the techniques of spin by breaking them down, using the marketing terms of ‘above’ and ‘below the line’. ‘Above the line’ activities I defined as “those, more or less overt initiatives, that in very simple terms, would have caused an ‘old fashioned’ press officer no great difficulty.” (Gaber 2000: 508); and ‘below the line’ as “those now more associated with the term ‘spin doctor’ - usually covert and as much about strategy and tactics as about the imparting of information” (Ibid).

Under the category of ‘above the line’ I included: publicising government/party announcements and speeches, reacting to such announcements and speeches, publicising interviews and articles and reacting to such and reacting to external events. My ‘below the line’ classification included: staying on message, spinning, “re- and pre-buttal”, setting and driving the news agenda, planting a story, building-up and undermining a personality, pre-empting, kite-flying, raising or lowering expectations and bullying and intimidation. I also included some more esoteric categories. These included: ‘milking a story’ – keeping a particular issue as high up the news agenda, for as long as possible, by finding new angles; ‘fire-breaking’ – “a deliberately constructed diversion to take journalists off the scent of an embarrassing story that seems, in the journalistic parlance, to have developed ‘legs’.” (Ibid: 512); ‘stoking the fire’ - “... the mirror image of ‘fire-breaking’ - finding material to keep an opponent’s awkward story running (Ibid: 513); ‘throwing out the bodies’ which involved taking advantage of a major news event to publish, hopefully unnoticed, bad news stories (Jo Moore provided a vivid example of this technique - shortly after this article was published she sent her now infamous email ‘good day to bury bad news’ on the 11<sup>th</sup> September 2001); and its mirror image, ‘laundering’ when, in order to camouflage an item of bad news, and in

the absence of a substantive positive news story, a minor item of 'good news' is released with the hope that the timing and presentation will relegate the bad news to the inside pages; and finally the 'white commonwealth' – a term first attributed to Harold Wilson's Press Secretary, Joe Haines (Cockerell et al 1984) which was "the name given to the creation of a favoured group of correspondents who received special treatment and access, above and beyond that available to other political correspondents." (Gaber 2000: 516).

The article ended with my speculation about an often debated subject "the end of spin?" I noted that in 1999 the Labour Government ran into a series of internal spats that led to the resignations of two of their chief spinners, Peter Mandelson (who was close to Tony Blair) and Charlie Whelan (Gordon Brown's spin doctor). Much was written at the time about this being perhaps "the end of 'government by spin' and the return to a more traditional, policy-based political discourse." (Ibid: 517). Yet even as Blair and his colleagues were launching a series of new policy initiatives, designed to focus discussion on policy rather than, the recently resigned Head of Information at the Department of Health, Romola Christopherson, was writing that Labour would find it impossible to wean itself off spin, to which, she said, it had become addicted. I concluded my article by saying, "Ms Christopherson's diagnosis of new Labour's addiction is unambiguous; whether or not it is prescient remains to be seen." (Ibid).

In the contemporary discussions around the 'crisis', two books struck me as highly pertinent – Franklin's *Packaging Politics* (1994) which presented an overview of the development of the marketisation of politics and Blumler and Gurevitch's *The Crisis of Public Communication* (1995). Both books raised concerns about the current state, and future trajectory, of political communications. I shared these concerns and this led me into my co-authoring *Westminster Tales: the 21st century crisis in political journalism*, with Steve Barnett. This much quoted volume argued, as its sub-title suggested, that as a result of the growth of spin and its associated culture there was a real danger that political journalists were being impeded from carrying out their work effectively, with concomitant implications for the quality of political discourse and the democratic process.

The jointly written introduction to the book (not submitted here) sets out our argument that "the vital function of independent and critical political reporting is being progressively undermined to the ultimate benefit of those in power." (Barnett and Gaber 2001: 1). Our

thesis was that this was “leading inexorably towards a more conformist, less critical reporting environment which is increasingly likely to prove supportive of incumbent governments.”(Ibid: 2) and we feared that journalists were facing “an increasing loss of independence.” And,

“In the classic sociological dichotomy of structure versus agency, we believe the pendulum has moved (and is still moving) away from the model of journalists as free professional agents towards a model of journalists increasingly beset and hemmed in by an array of different structural demands.” (Ibid).

We identified four separate, but interlocking, structural pressures which we argued were responsible for this undermining. These were first, changes in the relationship between political journalists and formal political sources as the latter increased their power - an affirmation of Hall’s notion of primary definers (Hall et al 1978) and a reinforcement of Schlesinger and Tumber’s observation that primary definers are not predetermined but learn to be successful “political entrepreneurs” (Schlesinger and Tumber 1990). Second, that the impact of media ownership, i.e. the willingness of owners to involve themselves more directly in the political stance of their newspapers (utilising Tunstall’s (1996) distinction between the old press lord and the new media mogul). Third, the unprecedented growth in media outlets, and the impact of this increased competition on the practice of political reporting (which we suggested has led to ‘tabloidisation’ – shorthand for changes in the style and content of political coverage which we argued had contributed to the further impoverishment of the public sphere). The final factor we identified was the changing nature of the journalism profession which covered changes in how it was managed, its training methods, its uses of new technology and its employment conditions (Barnet and Gaber 2001: 5-8).

In the two chapters submitted here (for which I was solely responsible) I developed one of the key themes of the monograph, namely that the balance of power, between politicians and the media at Westminster was being transformed in favour of the politicians. I argued that this transformation had come about for two main reasons. First, because of the electoral success of a Labour Party that had made communications a core political function - and this included seeking to gain maximum control over how the media reported politics. The second factor was the proliferation of outlets for political news as a result of the rise of 24-hour news-based television and radio channels, expanded print paginations and the start of online news coverage. These trends had dramatically shifted the balance of power in favour of politicians,

as the competition for news, gossip and interviews created a sellers' market, putting more power in the hands of the politicians and their media advisers, as they were able to distribute their 'favours' (i.e. interviews) to those outlets that they deemed would provide them with the most favourable coverage (Gaber 2001: 99/100).

I sought to analyse the impact these changes were having on the political reporting culture. Based on my personal experience, and on interviews with members of the Lobby, I demonstrated how reporting at Westminster had become "industrialised – more stories, being produced for more outlets at ever-greater speed." (Ibid: 125). And, as part of my commitment to using my professional knowledge to throw light on media processes, I outlined how the average political reporter's day had changed as a result of this 'industrialisation'. I argued that the most dramatic way that this changed reporting environment manifested itself was in the absence of political reporters from their three traditional Westminster 'hunting grounds' - the Press Gallery, the House of Commons Lobby and the Downing Street briefings. I analysed why this had come about and what impact it was having on the reporting of politics and I suggested a number of explanations for these trends. The two key ones were the growing desire, and ability, of government and political parties to try and drive the news agenda themselves and the increase in media competitiveness that was impinging on political journalists (as it was on journalists across the board) - a transformation being brought about largely, but not exclusively, by changes in the patterns of media ownership and regulation introduced in the 1980s. I also suggested that the then new phenomena of devolution, and the growth of the internet, were likely to have a profound impact on how politics would be reported at Westminster in the future. In retrospect I would suggest that, in terms of the latter this was very much the case; with regard to the former, very much less so.

My research output in this period did not just involve in using empirical data and personal observation to analyse specific issues. I was also writing about the broader ethical and professional dilemmas that confronted journalists as a result of the changes in the media/politics nexus described above. "Too much of a good thing: the 'problem' of political communications in a mass media democracy" published in the *Political Quarterly*, was a reflection on what I termed the democratic conundrum – that the greater emphasis placed on communication by politicians, far from leading to greater trust as some argued (Norris 2000, McNair 2003), seemed to be having the reverse effect. My starting point was the report of the 'Power Inquiry'<sup>xv</sup>, a major Rowntree-funded project established in 2004 at a time when there

was growing concern about the current, and future, trajectory of the British political system. The Inquiry, which made 30 recommendations designed, to "save British democracy from meltdown" argued:

“There is now a well-ingrained popular view across the country that our political institutions and their politicians are failing, untrustworthy, and disconnected from the great mass of the British people. This last point cannot be stressed too strongly. We have been struck by just how wide and deep is the contempt felt for formal politics in Britain.” (Power 2006: 220).

With this as a starting point I sought to reflect on the extent to which the political communications system might, in part at least, be responsible for this “well-ingrained popular view”. I suggested that one of the fundamental problems faced by modern democracies derived from the notion of 'informed consent':

“...democratic systems require that, in the interests of transparency, and ultimately, accountability, citizens should be kept as fully informed as possible by governments.” (Ibid: 219).

From this I constructed a thesis along the following lines: that in order to achieve this 'informed consent' – and because of concomitant media pressures – governments were under relentless pressure to 'communicate' in order to demonstrate real or perceived transparency. Hence, politicians in democracies were always looking to generate publicity, but at the same time they carried what I characterised as a 'selfish gene' (pace Dawkins 1989) that ensured that, irrespective of their immediate concerns, all their actions and pronouncements were underpinned by a calculation (whether consciously or otherwise) as to the likely effect on their own, and their party's, prospects of survival and reproduction (Price 2005, Campbell 2010 and 2011).

Thus, I argued that all political communications had both an overt and covert purpose. The overt one was simply the message itself – I gave examples of such in the article - but covertly (whether or not this has been consciously thought through), politicians and advisers were always calculating as to what their message might betoken in terms of their political standing. Thus, of necessity, they framed their messages in whatever way put the politician, or their party, in the best possible light – in other words 'spin'. Thus the public received messages that were not necessarily all that they might appear i.e. upbeat about themselves and downbeat about any opposition. And almost inevitably this meant that when the promised Nirvana, or threatened Armageddon, did not eventuate, the public's distrust of politicians was not just confirmed but amplified - hence the politician's lament, “the more we communicate the less

we are trusted”. However, the article concluded on a more positive note suggesting that rather than simply accepting this as a counsel of despair it might be feasible to introduce regulatory measures that would provide some sort of policing of the government's communications and information function that might ameliorate the worst aspects of the problem (although the proposal I outlined to give the Press Complaints Commission greater powers in this area has now been overtaken by the Leveson Inquiry and subsequent events).

My continuing interest in journalism ethics, particularly in the context of relations between the media and politicians, led me to write a number of articles in the wake of the eruption of two major contemporary scandals in this area - the revelations about MPs' expenses in 2009 and the phone-hacking and the subsequent Leveson Inquiry of 2011/12. The MPs' expenses scandal took me back to some of the issues I had discussed in *Westminster Tales* which related to the changes that were then taking place in how political journalists practised their trade at Westminster. In 'The Lobby in Transition: What the 2009 MPs' expenses scandal revealed about the changing relationship between politicians and the Westminster Lobby' published in *Media History*, I argued that one fall-out from the scandal was the damage it had done to the reputation and efficacy of the Westminster lobby. This was, in part, because the expenses story itself had not originated in the lobby. I argued that this failure symbolised the extent to which journalists at Westminster had become too close to the politicians they were supposed to be monitoring and too far from the public whom they were supposed to be serving. I used a comparative methodology by looking at the lobby, as it was at the time of the 2009 scandal, and the lobby as documented more than 40 years earlier by Colin Seymour-Ure (1968) and Jeremy Tunstall (1970) in their respective studies of Westminster journalists at work. I observed that the lobby's failure to spot the expenses scandal was:

“... in part an institutional failure, built into the fabric of the lobby, but was also the result of trends and changes in parliament, politics and the media that have been gaining momentum in recent years and which, in retrospect, made what happened, if not inevitable, at least explicable.” (Gaber 2013a: 46).

In particular I identified the fact that the lobby that Tunstall and Seymour-Ure observed was dominated by reporters from the regional press who, by the time of the 2009 scandal, had become very much a minority. The significance of this was that in the past the regional newspaper reporter, with just a few MPs in his or her patch, had the chance to get to know his or her local MPs in a way that national political correspondents never could. Hence, an MP having a lifestyle out of kilter with his or her salary, or 'flipping' homes with the regularity

that we now know took place, would very soon have come to the notice of their local political correspondent, particularly those able to follow MPs both at Westminster and in their home constituencies. In the absence of this sort of monitoring the continuing use of inflated expenses, as an adjunct to salary, never really came to the attention of most of the members of the lobby who only ever saw MPs at Westminster and, for the most part, were usually only really interested in front bench members.

But there were other factors that I identified that also help to explain why this oversight took place. These included, the shift in the political journalists' focus from Parliament to the television studios and the online environment, the news intensification process (previously outlined), the decline in the Members Lobby as a key meeting point, the vast increase in the spin machines, the fact that for many in the lobby the issue of MPs' allowances was not seen as much of political interest and finally the efforts of those MPs who were abusing the expenses system to do their best to conceal their activities.

Despite the fact that I had focussed much of my research on the workings of the Westminster lobby I had long been aware that political correspondents are not autonomous actors but are employees of large organisations, and that the political attitudes and interventions of their proprietors were the context within which they operated. Hence, in 2011 when the phone hacking scandal burst with the *News of the World* was at the centre of the storm, it was not long before the ownership and influence of Rupert Murdoch became a central issue of debate. I have produced five chapters or articles on aspects of this saga; in particular I have focussed on what the scandal and the subsequent Leveson Inquiry have told us about Rupert Murdoch's political influence and modus operandi. I have selected two such articles for this submission.

In the first, published in *Media Culture and Society*, – 'Rupert and the "Three Card Trope" – What You See Ain't Necessarily What You Get'. I analysed how Murdoch used his media power to gain political power, or at least political influence

In the wake of the hacking revelations Prime Minister David Cameron had been forced to admit that he and his colleagues had met Murdoch and his colleagues 27 times in the year since coming to power in June 2010 - an average of a meeting once a fortnight. I interrogated the figures in more detail and found that, because most of the meetings involved more than

one interlocutor from each side, the actual number of encounters between the Murdoch and the Cameron teams over the year was not 27, but 86 (Gaber 2012: 638). This, I argued, was a dramatic demonstration of just how unhealthily close the relationship had become. But I went on to ask whether such an intimate relationship was unique or was Murdoch simply applying to the Cameron Government the techniques he had used so successfully with Prime Ministers Thatcher, Blair and Brown?

In seeking to answer this question I researched the frequency of contacts between the Cameron Government and other media organisations and looked at what could be uncovered about contacts between Murdoch and previous Labour and Conservative governments. In terms of the Cameron Government it emerged that in their first year of government he and his colleagues had had almost as many meetings with News International as they had had with all other news organisations combined (Ibid: 639). No comparable figures had been released by the Blair or Brown governments but by data mining the diaries of Alastair Campbell I was able to reveal that between 1994 and 2001 he made more references to Rupert Murdoch than to the editors of the *Sun*, the *Daily Mirror* and the *Daily Mail* as well as the *Mail's* proprietor and the Director General of the BBC combined (Ibid). There was even less data available covering Thatcher/Murdoch meetings but what information there was, I suggested, was unreliable in the extreme. For example, in contrast to Campbell, Mrs Thatcher's memoirs make literally no reference to Murdoch at all (Thatcher 1995). However, I went on to point out that at the time of Murdoch's proposed takeover of *The Times* and the *Sunday Times* in 1981 Mrs Thatcher had held a secret meeting with Murdoch, which her then press secretary, Bernard Ingham had cautioned should be treated as 'confidential' (McSmith 2012) – how many other such 'confidential' meetings took place can only be guessed at.

From this 'secret history' I went on to analyse how Murdoch operates, in terms of obtaining and maintaining the influence and power that he clearly wields over political leaders. I identified three 'Murdoch 'tropes' that, I argued, help us understand the Murdoch phenomenon. I suggested that:

“...whilst, media magnates, both past and present, have tended to use their media interests in one of a number of causes – to advance a political cause, their business interests, their family interests or simply, themselves; for Murdoch all four seem to be equally important.” (Ibid: 641).

I have subsequently re-thought this conclusion in the light of David McKnight's (2013) trenchant analysis of Murdoch's career in which he demonstrates that whilst Murdoch has

always had a number of career goals, his overwhelming motivation has been the advancement of his own particular brand of right-wing politics. However, my analysis of the Murdoch “tropes” as a means of increasing his political and corporate power and influence (if not his motivation) remains valid, for despite cultivating an image as just a ‘newspaperman’ Murdoch has been adept at ensuring that his interests were globally spread and diversified across virtually all forms of media.

I also documented Murdoch’s ruthlessness, both in terms of his treatment of what he saw as under-performing individuals and of the agreements he had put his name to. I quoted his former editor Harold Evans as saying: “Murdoch is the Houdini of agreements” (Evans 2011: xxix) and I concluded by speculating that perhaps the fall-out from the hacking scandal, and the subsequent closure of the *News of the World*, might be the undermining of the political power of Rupert Murdoch, at least as far as the UK was concerned:

“... have the Murdoch tropes lost their magic? And if they have, has the time come for the 81-year-old Wizard of Oz, to take his final bow, hang up his wand and retire gracefully behind the velvet curtain?” (Gaber 2012: 645).

The second aspect of the hacking scandal here being submitted is a chapter - “Two and a Half Cheers for Leveson” – from an edited collection *After Leveson: the Future of British Journalism*<sup>xvi</sup>. I used this chapter to look at Leveson’s analysis of, and prescription for, the relations between politicians and the press, and, specifically, relations between press proprietors and managers, rather than those involving working journalists.

In the furore which greeted Leveson’s proposals for a statutorily underpinned system of self-regulation of the press, little media (or academic) attention was paid to either his 359-page analysis of relations between press and politicians, and even less to his proposals aimed at seeking to ensure that, what he saw as, the unhealthy state of these relations which he described as “too close to give sufficient grounds for confidence” (Leveson: 1119) was remedied. He offered a number of proposals that he suggested would put the relationships between senior media executives and politicians on a more transparent and equitable basis (proposals not dissimilar to those that I myself had sent to the Inquiry).

However, the chapter title – two and half as opposed to three cheers – was occasioned by what I saw as Leveson’s failure to draw the appropriate conclusions, from the evidence he

heard, about the conduct of Jeremy Hunt, the minister responsible for overseeing the proposed takeover of BSkyB by News International, whose relations with News International became matters of public concern. I expressed my surprise at Leveson's lenient treatment of Hunt. He castigated the minister for failing to properly supervise his special adviser (Adam Smith) when the Government was considering the News International bid (for example it was revealed that Smith had sent no fewer than 690 text messages to his News International counterpart during this period) and Leveson also suggested Hunt had failed in meeting the test of not only 'being impartial' but 'appearing to be impartial'. Leveson observed: "... it is not clear that he (Hunt) fully understood just how scrupulous he needed to be to avoid the appearance of bias." (Leveson: 1390). But he then went on to find that (despite this being a world where nothing was set down on paper), he could find no unambiguous evidence that Hunt had acted improperly. I opined that Leveson was perhaps being more charitable than necessary, when he concluded: "In the circumstances, I accept what I have been told." (Leveson P. 1403). I suggested that perhaps a verdict of 'not proven' might have been more appropriate than 'not guilty'.

## Election Coverage

1. "Dislocated and Distracted: Media, Parties and the Voters in the 2005 General Election Campaign" *British Politics* (2006)
2. "The Hollowed-out Election; or where did all the policy go" (2013) *Journal of Political Marketing* (2013)
3. "The Transformation of Campaign Reporting: the 2010 UK General Election, Revolution or Evolution?" in *Political Communication in Britain: The Leader debates, the Campaign and the Media in the 2010 General Election*" Wring D. et al (eds.) (2011)

My continuing interest in the relations between politicians and the media meant that a significant part of both my continuing professional practice, and my scholarly output, has revolved around election campaigns. Professionally I have been employed either as a consultant, or commentator, by either BBC or ITV News, in every General Election since becoming an academic in 1985. In research terms I have focussed on the parties' efforts to try and maximise positive coverage and minimise the negative during the weeks of the campaign. To this end I have published a number of election studies. During the 2005 election I sought to investigate the relationship, if any, between the issue agendas of the media, the parties and the public. In "Dislocated and Distracted: Media, Parties and the Voters in the 2005 General Election Campaign" published in *British Politics*, I argued that there was a demonstrable fracture between the various issue agendas pursued by the parties, the media and the voters. I based my argument both on my own experience working at ITV News during the election campaign and on a comprehensive content analysis of all the press releases distributed by the three main parties during the campaign. This built on earlier work that had sought to analyse election news agenda setting (Semetko et al 1991, Norris et al 2000 and Brandenburg 2002).

The argument I advanced for explaining this fracture was that campaigning, like political reporting, was changing. For whilst the national news media was still the predominant site of the campaign battle there was a trend for parties to give ever-greater emphasis to finding means of communicating with the electorate that by-passed the national media (Franklin, 2004; Kavanagh and Butler, 2005; Smith, 2005; Wring, 2005). In this article I introduced into the academic discussion a notion I had first heard about on the campaign trail – that of the 'air war' and the 'ground war'. The former was the campaign as fought in the national media,

mainly by the party leaders. The latter was the constituency-by-constituency battle that took place in the marginal seats, largely below the radar of the national media, and involved politicians in direct contact with the electorate – by means of contact on the doorstep, by direct mail, phone calls, text messaging, local websites, email and social media. This is a distinction that did not suddenly come into existence in 2005 – although that was the first time I had found it so described - but had evolved. In the article I suggested that it had begun with the 1979 Conservative election campaign, but had become a major factor with the rise of New Labour. I suggested that the deterioration in the political public sphere that I had charted in much of my work to date was one of the main drivers behind this change which I attributed to voter alienation from ‘traditional’ politics, declining media interest in reporting campaigns and the parties’ general frustration with the national media’s reporting of politics.

I also used this research to engage with debates around news agendas. I argued that it was not helpful to talk about ‘a news agenda’ as such, but instead I identified a number of differing news agendas all in competition with each other throughout the campaign. These were the agendas of the three main parties, the differing media agendas of the tabloids, the broadsheets and the broadcasters and finally the public’s agenda - none of which seemed to impact markedly on any other, a point echoed by Pippa Norris (2006 and 2008) in her studies of the 2005 election. My research also challenged the oft-quoted claims made by the parties that they always sought to run positive policy-orientated campaigns, as opposed to the negativity of their opponents and the media. My analysis clearly demonstrated that all three parties concentrated their media campaign tactics not on policy but on promoting themselves and, in particular, on attacking their opponents.

I also demonstrated how, despite the parties’ preoccupation that the economy was the key issue (as they had campaigned in 1997 and 2001), neither the media nor the public perceived the economic issues to be central to their own priorities. I concluded by asking whether these findings enabled one to say that election communication was undergoing a process of transition, similar to that which I had previously identified as impacting on political reporting - arising from the growing marketisation and mediatisation of politics. I characterised campaigning in 2005 as “new spin” in which the parties made use of a wide range of communication techniques, in contrast to “old spin” which concentrated on their somewhat heavy-handed attempts to control the traditional media. I concluded by suggesting that whether this change was long-term, or merely a response to the particular circumstances of

2005, would have to await research following the next General Election. One commentary on my work, suggested that it might offer a breakthrough in our thinking about party media strategies. Jackson wrote that my research: "... suggests that strategy stories are not just the invention of journalists, but can actually be driven by the agendas of the parties themselves."<sup>xvii</sup> (Jackson 2011: 173)

I returned to these questions at the time of the 2010 election when I sought to undertake a similar content analysis of the parties' media releases in an article for the *Journal of Political Marketing* under the title "The Hollowed-out Election; or where did all the policy go?"<sup>xviii</sup> In this article I argued that, partly as a result of the focus on the leaders' debates, and partly because of the political convergence of Labour and the Conservatives, the 2010 election was an almost entirely policy-free environment, despite the plethora of media and communication initiatives by the parties and the greater levels of media interest in the campaign when compared with the 2005 election.

Two factors made direct comparison between the 2005 and 2010 elections problematic. First, because the 2010 campaign was dominated by the first-ever televised leaders' debates, obviously not a factor in 2005, and second, because changes in campaigning, and in particular those resulting from the growing use of social media by the parties, made it impossible to conduct an exact like-for-like comparison of the use of press releases by the parties. This was because in 2010, whilst the parties still made some use of traditional releases posted on their websites, they were also using blog posts, tweets and other forms of social media to alert journalists to their latest policy pronouncements and these initiatives did not lend themselves either to robust enumeration or comparison with 2005. There was a significant decline in the number of conventional press releases issued but it was impossible to argue that these had, or had not, been more than made up for by the increase in social media traffic.

Nonetheless, I was able to conclude that, based on an analysis of the media and communications outputs of the parties, interviews with key actors, polling and my own experience as a participant in the media coverage of the election (I was the BBC World Service's on-air election expert), the campaign had even less policy content than in 2005, when that factor itself had been a noticeable feature of that campaign. I argued that:

“The 2010 election was characterised by a hollowed-out campaign, with policy differences between the parties drowned out by the noise of the leaders’ debates. But this noise also drowned out any suggestion that this process was actually taking place.” (Gaber 2013c: 13).

For my conclusion I drew upon a little noticed Labour press release in which the party bemoaned the fact that the broadcasters’ campaign reporting was concentrating too much on the leaders’ debates at the expense of coverage of wider policy issues. In the release the Labour Party asked the other main parties to join them in an approach to the broadcasters (which was not taken up). The Labour Party wrote: “... that whilst our manifestos were fully, fairly and properly covered, since then the usual specialist examination of specific policy areas has not been done” (Watt and Wintour 2010). I used this initiative to conclude:

“ Despite being written two weeks before polling day, this statement from the Labour Party stands as an appropriate epitaph on the hollowed-out campaign of 2010 which, if it is to be the model for the future, represents a trend that has worrying implications for the future democratic content of British election campaigns.” (Gaber2013c: 13).

As a participant in the media’s coverage of the 2010 campaign I was struck, not just by the absence of any substantive policy debate, but how, as a result of the dramatic changes in the media environment then taking place, the business of election news reporting was being radically transformed. These reflections were published in my contribution to the continuing post-election book series - *Political Communication in Britain* – ‘The Transformation of Campaign Reporting: the 2010 UK General Election, Revolution or Evolution?’

In this chapter, based on my own experience and interviews with political journalists and party press officers, I argued that the 2010 election “represented a transformative moment in the reporting of British General Election campaigns” (Gaber 2011: 26). I made this statement not just because the election featured the first-ever televised leaders’ debates but less spectacularly, but no less profoundly, because of the revolutionary changes that I identified were transforming election reporting. These changes were taking place both within the parties and the media. For the parties the overwhelming concentration on the ‘ground war’, first identified in the 2005 campaign, led to the almost total disappearance of the morning party press conferences and to significant changes in how parties used press releases, regional leaders’ tours and other set-piece events. At the same time the parties were seeking evermore direct contact with the electorate in their target seats through face-to-face contacts, direct mail, phone calls, email and social media.

The transformation was also having a major impact on journalists' working practices. This was partly as a result of the changes taking place in the parties' campaigning methods but also because of the process of 'news intensification', discussed earlier. This intensification involved both the flow of information coming into political reporters' figurative, and actual, inboxes, and the almost constant demands being made on them to provide output for a range of digital news platforms. I sought to capture this intensification by contrasting two metaphorical snapshots of a political reporter's working day:

"The first comes from the 2010 election and it would show a tweeting, blogging, web-posting political reporter struggling to stay across all the news coming at him or her during the hectic days, and nights, of the campaign and also struggling to disseminate it. The second is the reporter, leading a more ordered, almost sepia-like, existence during the 1979 campaign, the last time Labour was ejected from office. This was a time when there was no breakfast time television, no 24-hour TV and radio news, no mobile phones and the internet was no more than a twinkle in the eye of military planners and IT enthusiasts." (Ibid: 262).

In the case of the 2010 reporter, I drew attention to the fact that the timing of the leaders' debates on a Thursday meant that for virtually the entire three weeks of the campaign their lives were dominated by the debates. The weekend media set the tone by looking back at the previous week's debate and speculating as to the likely pattern of the debate to come; this speculation continued up until Thursday and began again on the Friday with both retrospective reports on the debate just completed and speculation on that which was to follow. The debates not only had a major impact on the politicians and parties, but also dramatically affected the reporting routines of the journalists, especially as the debates were held in three locations all outside London. For the journalists, as well as the politicians and party managers I interviewed, the debates changed the whole rhythm and conduct of the campaign.

Adam Boulton, the long-serving Political Editor of Sky News, made a particularly strong statement in his interview, which gave me the conclusion to my article. His argument – and it has to be noted that this came from one of the debates' presenters – was that the 2010 election campaign had been transformative, not necessarily because of the reasons outlined above, but because the debates demonstrated, once and for all, that television was the dominant medium of the campaign. He said:

"For the first time I cannot recall a single print interview or article which impacted on the work I was doing...I do not expect newspapers will ever again be the primary and

dominant force of political coverage – the electronic media will not give up that role.” (Ibid: 277).

From this I concluded by suggesting:

“...[if] as seems likely, the leaders’ debates are continued, the broadcasters (pace Adam Boulton) will again be able to claim that they are the main stage upon which the election is being fought. But their colleagues in the press will know that, in terms of the performances, they are the critics – and as any theatrical impresario will tell you - it’s the critics, rather than the performers, who determines the public’s reaction to the, in this case, electoral drama unfolding.” (Ibid: 280).

## Bias and Representation

1. *Culture Wars: the media and the British Left* with Curran J. and Petley J Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press (2005)  
Chapter 7 “Slaying the Dragon”  
Chapter 8 “Driven to Distraction”
2. “Is the BBC Biased: the Corporation and the Coverage of the 2006 Israeli-Hezbollah War” (2009) in *Journalism, Theory, Practice and Criticism* (2009)
3. Three cheers for subjectivity: or the crumbling of the seven pillars of traditional journalistic wisdom in *The End of Journalism?* Charles A and Stewart G. eds. Peter Lang (2010)

My interest in election news agendas also reflected a continuing interest I have had in agenda-setting in general, and in notions of framing and priming. This is represented in a number of content analysis research projects I have undertaken, here submitted. The first, commissioned by the Office of the Mayor of London, involved an analysis of how the national media had covered the introduction of the London congestion charge in 2003. My report, *Driven to Distraction: an analysis of the media's coverage of the London congestion charge* was published by Goldsmiths' Media Research Group (Gaber 2003). It demonstrated how the majority of the mainstream media reported the charge as a potentially major threat to the economic and social development of the capital; the reporting demonstrated significant bias and misrepresentation in their reporting of the story. Based on this report I published a briefer version of the report in a jointly authored book *Culture Wars: the media and the British Left* (with James Curran and Julian Petley) - here submitted - in which the media's bias in the reporting of the congestion charge was placed in the context of the media's more general approach to reporting the political left – particularly that part of it that came to be known as the London 'loony left'.

In order to demonstrate that the biases and misrepresentations that I had identified were neither arbitrary nor accidental, I preceded my chapter summarising this research by one that put the media's approach to reporting Labour politics into its historical context. In the chapter here submitted, "Slaying the Dragon" I analysed how the media, in collusion with the then leadership of the Labour Party, sought to develop and exploit the notion of the 'loony left'. “Slaying the Dragon” represents, I believe, a good example of my combining my knowledge of, and professional expertise in, the media with my academic and practical background in reporting politics.

The starting point for the campaign against the Labour left came in the 1980s when the Conservatives, under Norman Tebbit's guidance, encouraged the right-wing press to use the term 'loony left' to characterise a Labour Party that had moved to the left and that therefore could be characterised as representing an 'alien' threat to quintessential British values (Heffernan and Marquess 1992, Fielding 2003, Finlayson 2003 and Bale 2010). However, in this chapter I revealed, through the use of primary sources and my professional experience, how the 'loony left' threat was given added momentum, and was sustained in the media, not just by the Conservatives and their press allies but also by the Labour leadership itself. I demonstrated that the creation of New Labour and the election of Tony Blair required a general acceptance – and here the media was crucial – that the Party had undergone a radical transformation, so radical that in fact it was virtually a 'new' party. To make this credible it was necessary for the old Labour Party to be characterised as not just 'old' but extremist and out-of-touch – a dragon that New Labour had to vanquish. I suggested that this had come about, not just out of electoral necessity, but was also a result of how the mediatisation of political communications (Strömbäck 2008) had affected politics and political communication. In what is a common theme throughout this commentary, I wrote;

"The rise of New Labour was not just associated with the rise of the political marketing paradigm - a trend in itself that owed much to the privatisation of public life - a paradigm which saw voters as consumers, policies as products and parties as sales organisations. It was also associated with the near total dominance, of electioneering by the mass media; so as parties shifted from being organisations of volunteer leafleteers and door-knockers to professionalised organisations dedicated to persuading and mobilising the public, so the defining of what was 'politically acceptable' to the electorate became something that became more and more dominated by the mass media rather than, as it had been in the past, a process that was the preserve of the political parties and their decision-making processes. "(Gaber 2005a: 191).

A significant feature of this process of the marketisation of political parties was the central role given to focus group research – articulated by President Clinton who said:

"There is no one more powerful today than the member of a focus group. If you really want to change things and you want to get listened to, that's the place to be."<sup>xix</sup>

The late Phillip Gould, a key adviser to Tony Blair, was the main protagonist in New Labour arguing for the importance of the focus group. In this chapter I argued that he had misused this research technique, to advance his own political aims. In his autobiographical *The Unfinished Revolution* (1998) he described his unorthodox approach to moderating focus groups: "I do not just sit there and listen." he wrote, "I challenge, I argue back, I force them to confront issues." (Gould 1998: 213). I questioned this approach:

“Exciting stuff it might be but objective research it certainly is not. If, and it's not a big 'if', Gould was convinced that one of Labour's major weaknesses was the perception that it was not trusted, and that the principle cause of this was that the Party was perceived to be dominated by the 'hard left', it is hardly surprising that he came back with the news that that was exactly what people believed - especially in the light of his own particular 'research method'. As one reads Gould's account of his encounters with focus groups it is difficult to dispel from one's mind the image of a hapless group of focus group subjects sitting in a North London front room in the early nineties, being forced to 'admit' (à la “1984”) that it was the 'loony left' that had kept them from voting Labour.” (Gaber 2005a: 214).

I then drew attention to the fact that Gould's, and subsequently New Labour's, approach to research drew the risk of their failing to learn the lesson of the ‘spiral of silence’ - first revealed by Elizabeth Noelle-Neumann (1993). The spiral is the way that certain attitudes and views become deemed as 'socially acceptable' and others 'unacceptable'. Respondents, when faced with researchers (particularly face-to-face), will often seek to give the 'correct' i.e. socially acceptable answer. The significance of this, as I observed in the chapter, was that:

“Gould's views about what voters were thinking carried significant weight in Labour's inner circles; in his own words: 'I was seen as the voice of the electorate.' (Gaber 2005a: 215).

Having supposedly slain the dragon of 'old Labour' and two years after New Labour's triumph at the polls, the leadership again had to face up its ‘loony left’ demons when Ken Livingstone sought to become the Party's candidate for the position of the first-ever elected mayor of London. For many in the Labour leadership Livingstone personified all the worst elements of the 'loony left' and, as I outlined, they resurrected the loony left dragon in an unsuccessful attempt to block Livingstone's candidature. They did succeed in denying him the Labour nomination but Livingstone ultimately triumphed by running and winning the mayoralty as an independent.

On being elected, one of his first, and most significant, policy initiatives was to introduce the London congestion charge. In the run-up to its introduction Livingstone, and the charge, were subjected to a hostile campaign by much of the media, spearheaded by the London *Evening Standard*. Much of this coverage, which I outlined in the second chapter of the book here submitted - “Driven to Distraction” - echoed the loony left campaigns of the past; and I found evidence that this too was being encouraged, or at least not discouraged, by the Labour leadership.

The research, upon which the chapter was based, involved an analysis of all the congestion charge coverage in the national daily and Sunday newspapers, the *Evening Standard*, the London daily free-sheet the *Metro* and the main bulletins on BBC TV and ITV for London from 1 January 2002 to 31 May 2003. I undertook a detailed content and discourse analysis of this material and I also used this data to look at issues around framing, sourcing and representation. The principle theme of the chapter was that media coverage of the charge was framed around the notion of 'the loony left rides again' – a frame initially encouraged by the Labour leadership's attempts to block Livingstone's election as mayor and then again, as they attempted to distance themselves from his more controversial policies.

The content analysis revealed that the terms 'loony left' and 'Red Ken' were used frequently by the press in the period under review. Perhaps unsurprisingly the *Sun* topped the table with 29 references to 'Red Ken' and 10 to the 'loony left' just behind was the *Daily Telegraph* which referred to 'Red Ken' 31 times and the 'loony left' 7 times and the *Evening Standard* which referred to 'Red Ken' 23 times and the 'loony left' 14 times (2005b: 233).

Deeper analysis revealed that, for the press, the term 'loony left' had three distinct resonances. The first connected Livingstone with 'insanity', the second with 'authoritarianism' and the third with 'left-wing extremism' - these last two being inextricably linked (Ibid: 229). Hence, much of the coverage framed the story in terms of fear - Livingstone was portrayed as a threatening authoritarian madman determined to impose his wild ideas on London, irrespective of the consequences. I noted how journalists tended to privilege certain primary definers as authoritative sources of information about the possible effects of the charge and this was reflected by the ease which many of these sources were able to feed the media scare stories, most of which subsequently proved to be without foundation. The *Evening Standard* carried more 'scare' stories than any other paper – a total of 33 were identified, of which there were 13 in the two months prior to the introduction of the charge. The other London daily, the *Metro*, carried 21 scare stories, of which 11 were run in these last two months. Figures for other papers included the *Daily Telegraph* at 27 of which 10 were in the last two months, but pride of place – so to speak - must go to the *Mail on Sunday* which, whilst only appearing once a week, came up with 16 scare stories, 10 of which were run in the two months before the charge came in (Ibid: 235).

One particular long-running scare story, which the research deconstructed in detail, was to be found predominantly, but not exclusively, in the *Evening Standard* (Ibid: 236-239). It concerned an allegation that the Mayor was manipulating the phasing of traffic lights in central London as part of a grand ‘conspiracy’ to make the congestion charge, when it was introduced, appear to be working better than it was. The research identified two aspects of this story which throw an interesting light on some of the ethical practices of the press - a familiar litany heard during the Leveson Inquiry a decade later. The first was that the initial sourcing of the ‘conspiracy’ in the *Evening Standard* was so absurdly vague that it is of some surprise that the paper chose to run the story at all, let alone on its front page. The paper attributed their scoop to anonymous “sources” - with not even an attempt to suggest their sources’ general provenance or standing. But having then published the story the paper was subsequently able to dispense with even this limp attribution and began sourcing the story to itself, using the phrase “as exclusively revealed in the *Evening Standard*” - a curiosity of journalistic reflexivity.

Equally fascinating was how the paper characterised Livingstone’s outright denial of the allegation - as one headline put it: 'Ken Livingstone: refusing to come clean on "secret" plans to rig London's traffic lights' (*Evening Standard* 7 March 2003). In other words, as I wrote at the time:

“... the Mayor was placed in a situation in which he was offered the choice of admitting that the *Evening Standard's* story was true - and thus being found guilty of practising a massive deceit on the people of London - or denying the charge and being found guilty of covering up the conspiracy. Either way he was presented as being either 'guilty', or 'guilty'.” (Ibid: 237).

The chapter ended with conclusions about the overall significance of the coverage and I took the opportunity of reiterating my concerns about the deteriorating state of the political public sphere in London, given the *Evening Standard's* monopoly position:

“As the monopoly supplier in the paid-for London newspaper market the *Evening Standard* has a responsibility to provide Londoners with reliable and balanced coverage of the affairs of the capital. In the case of congestion charging it appears that through much of the build-up to the introduction of the charge, this they failed to do.”(Ibid: 248/9).

Another content analysis research project I undertook around this time was into how BBC TV News covered the 2006 war between Israel and Hezbollah, commissioned by the Britain-Israel Communications and Research Centre. In order to make this evaluation academically

robust I also used ITV News' coverage over the same period as a control group. Overall I concluded that the BBC's coverage could be characterised as broadly unbiased, particularly when compared with ITV's. This research was published in *Journalism, Theory, Practice and Criticism* in 2009 under the title "Is the BBC Biased: the Corporation and the Coverage of the 2006 Israeli-Hezbollah War."

The BBC's coverage of the Israel/Palestine dispute has long attracted controversy, with both sides in the ongoing conflict firmly convinced of the bias of the Corporation. In 2006 the BBC Governors conducted a review of their coverage which resulted in the creation of a new set of Middle East editorial guidelines; these were published shortly after the Israel/Hezbollah war broke out. This research sought to measure the BBC's coverage against its own new editorial guidelines and against the coverage of ITV News.

A content analysis of all coverage of the war on the two flagship television news bulletins – the BBC News at 10.00pm and the ITV News at 10.30pm – was undertaken. This involved logging and analysing a total of 228 separate news items. I utilised a framing approach and analysed the coverage in terms of the range of different news frames that were detected to be in use by the broadcasters. This revealed that approximately a quarter of both the BBC's and ITV's coverage was framed around the direct impact the war was having on the population of southern Lebanon whilst 10 per cent was framed in terms of the impact on the Israeli population; I noted:

"... this might appear to represent a disparity in coverage favouring the Lebanese side but, given the disparity in casualties – a rough ratio of 10 Lebanese casualties to every Israeli casualty – there was in fact a pro-Israeli bias in coverage by both the BBC and ITV."  
(Gaber 2009: 246).

Other news frames detected included Israel's military and/or political goals, international politics and diplomacy, the plight of evacuees from Lebanon (mainly British) and finally 'context' which despite the BBC guidelines stressing its importance, received just 9.6 percent of the BBC's coverage and only 3.6 percent of ITV's (Ibid: 247).

As outlined in the methodology section above, I developed a unique mode of analysis that sought to combine qualitative and quantitative approaches that enable me to make generalisations to in both broad terms about the coverage but also in terms of my conclusions about the central question, namely 'Is the BBC Biased?' By using the notion of 'Point of

View' (POV), and by the use of double blind pilots to ensure that the coding frame was robust, I could draw conclusions that were methodologically sound and, as yet, have not been challenged. Using this methodology I found that the BBC achieved broad parity overall in reflecting both an Israeli POV and a Lebanese/Hezbollah POV. ITV News was somewhat less successful in terms of balance, demonstrating a bias against Israel (mainly accounted for by its greater enthusiasm for dramatic pictorial coverage of the Lebanese civilian victims of Israeli bombing raids) (Ibid: 248).

Whilst making a certain number of criticisms of the BBC's coverage I concluded:

“ ... [it] is difficult to avoid the conclusion that, given the complexities of the issue, the pressures of time and space and the sheer difficulties of reporting from hostile environments, both BBC and ITV News acquitted themselves well in their reporting of the 2006 Israeli–Hezbollah war.” (Ibid: 258).

In the same year I looked at another major ethical issue facing political journalists, namely how new media, and the related phenomenon of citizen journalism, was impacting on long-standing debates about objectivity. In “Three cheers for Subjectivity: or the crumbling of the seven pillars of journalistic wisdom” published in *The End of Journalism? News in the twenty-first century*, I suggested that new technology had simplified this debate and made a new 'ethical subjectivity' a journalistic imperative. I argued that this applied to both mainstream and citizen journalists alike. I suggested that the creation of a new breed of journalists – bloggers and other social media activists – was bringing into sharp focus the debates around objectivity. This was because many of these new journalists felt no sense of attachment to the traditional nostrums of journalistic behaviour which are encapsulated by the notion of objectivity, indeed they often glorified in distancing themselves from such nostrums.

Based on my experience as a political journalist, and given the way that non-traditional journalism is changing our understanding of the journalistic process, I argued for a radical new approach to ethics that put subjectivity, rather than objectivity, at its heart. My interpretation of subjectivity, in this context, was to suggest that all journalists – traditional and new – should, as a first step, recognise their own predispositions and then seek to report and write using as their yardstick, not objectivity, but ‘fairness’. This I interpreted as something that is wholly subjective and can only effectively be interrogated and validated by

the journalist him or herself. This is because it is ultimately only the person who has observed the event, gathered the material or undertaken the interviews, who is really in a position to judge whether the overall thrust of the final media artefact answers the question “Is this fair?”

I developed this proposition by first demonstrating the fallaciousness not just of the notion of achieving objectivity – described by Kovach and Rosenstiel as “one of the great confusions of journalism” (2007: 81) but also of, what many journalists and journalism academics propose as an alternative, that of making objectivity an ultimate, if unachievable, goal. I suggested that these were misleading and unhelpful propositions:

“Every attempt by journalists to argue that they are able to put aside their own beliefs, feelings etc. and become, or aspire to become, genuinely ‘objective’, strengthens a dangerous canard. For it is when journalists believe they have attained Olympian objectivity that they are in greatest danger of failing to see how their own conscious and unconscious motivations are affecting what and how they report.” (Gaber 2010: 5).

In retrospect I would argue that this perhaps puts the case too starkly and that I probably overstated the subjectivity/objectivity divide. For example Kovach and Rosenstiel suggest that objectivity should be seen as a journalistic methodology rather than as a goal, they describe it as:

“.... a consistent method of testing information – a transparent approach to evidence – precisely so that personal and cultural biases would not undermine the accuracy of their work.” (Kovach and Rosenstiel 2007: 88).

In the submitted article, I invoked two sets of journalistic imperatives, one that might appeal to what I termed ‘traditional’ journalists and the other that seemed more appropriate for less traditionally-minded journalists, and for bloggers and other citizen journalists. The first I characterised as “The Seven Pillars of Traditional Journalistic Wisdom” namely:

“Journalists seek to be objective, bloggers do not.  
Journalists are interested in ‘the truth’, for bloggers this is negotiable.  
Journalists are impartial, bloggers are not.  
Journalists seek balance, bloggers do not.  
Journalists are unbiased, bloggers are proudly biased  
Journalists are independent, bloggers are not.  
Journalists strive to ‘get it right, bloggers do not.” (Gaber 2010: 6).

I made it clear that these imperatives were a set of ‘straw men’ constructed for the purposes of advancing the argument, but I used them to demonstrate that at the heart of these notions was objectivity, with all the shortcomings set out above. But there were also other shortcomings in the traditional ethical codes and practices of journalism. These included the

notion that there was one single ‘truth’ to be gathered and reported, that ‘balance’ implies that all issues have two equally valid sides and also how concepts such as ‘impartiality’ ‘lack of bias’ and ‘independence’ are not much more than elaborations of the idea of the attainability of journalistic detachment that is at the heart of the objectivity canard.

I then contrasted these ‘traditional pillars’ with what I termed, “The Seven Pillars of New Journalistic Wisdom”, applicable to journalists and bloggers alike. These I enumerated as:

“Thou shalt recognise one's own subjectivity.  
Thou shalt strive to be fair.  
Thou shalt strive to be accurate.  
Thou shalt strive to be thorough.  
Thou shalt seek verification.  
Thou shalt strive to be transparent.  
Thou shalt be accountable.” (Ibid: 8).

Again, drawing on my own experience, I illustrated how the application of these practices could lead to a journalism that was, both in terms of ethics and content, more satisfactory for both journalists and audiences alike. The linked issues of subjectivity and fairness have already been discussed; but I was also keen to demonstrate, or at least advocate, that all those practising journalism, in whatever medium, should strive to be accurate, thorough, transparent and to produce work that was verifiable and accountable (Ibid: 8).

One weakness of this article - less apparent at the time of writing but which has now moved into sharper focus - was my failure to differentiate between the various types of bloggers and citizen journalists. Certainly there are many journalists writing for non-mainstream websites and blogspots – both generalist and specialist – who seek to convey information to their audiences as fairly and accurately as possible. However, there are also those who don’t – accuracy might be high on their aspirational list but fairness is not. Hence, in UK political reportage, for example, one might contrast PoliticsHome or the Huffington Post (both widely-read and seeking ‘fairness’) with Guido Fawkes’ influential and equally well-informed, but totally biased blogspot ‘Order, Order’ (and although he does break news stories, they are almost always in line with his political predispositions). Guido Fawkes – real name Paul Staines - makes no claims to objectivity as he makes clear himself on his website:

“The primary motivation for the creation of the blog was purely to make mischief at the expense of politicians and for the author’s own self-gratification.... The British blogosphere was at that time full of wannabee *Telegraph* and *Guardian* leader writers. Guido set out to be sensationalist, Matt Drudge was an inspiration, Kelvin Mackenzie’s *Sun* of the 80s was another.” (Staines 2013)

However, Staines also makes clear that he sees himself very much as a journalist - in the muckraking tradition: he writes:

“Guido sees himself as a journalist, a campaigning journalist who publishes via a website. He campaigns against political sleaze and hypocrisy. He doesn’t believe in impartiality nor pretend to it.” (Ibid).

Such a stance, which is not unique to the Guido Fawkes website, indicates the complexity of trying to create ethical codes that are appropriate for both the mainstream and the new media – an issue that Lord Justice Leveson body-swerved around in his final report.

## **Future Research Trajectories**

The complexities and confusions of the “Order, Order” blogspot is an appropriate point to end this commentary and to suggest new research trajectories. This is because the impact and influence of Guido Fawkes is something that no scholar of political communications can ignore, and that few predicted. Clearly one of the key areas for research lies in monitoring the continuing impact of the digital media on the political public sphere and evaluating to what extent the trend, which in the first section of this commentary, I suggested might be emerging – that of an enhancement of the democratic conversation – is sustained or chimerical. We are still in relatively uncharted waters, for whilst we have now had almost two decades of experience of web-based political communication, the social media are still very much in their infancy. With Facebook and Twitter now so much a part of everyday political communications it is easy to forget that Facebook was only launched in 2004 and Twitter in 2006.

Along with the impact of the social media on political communications, scholars will also need to be evaluating the impact of the continuing decline of newspapers as key agenda-setters in the political debate. Adam Boulton, Political Editor of Sky News, has said, only half jokingly, that the main role of newspapers today is to fill the ‘Tomorrow’s Press’ slot on the 24-hour TV news channels (Boulton 2013). Whilst the decline in circulation of the press has been a long-term phenomenon, newspapers have still, for the most part, been able to retain a key role in setting the national political agenda. For how much longer that will be the case, if it still is, and what impact this will have on the political communication process, is another factor that will need continuing analysis and evaluation.

One constant in this media landscape has been the sustained importance of mainstream broadcasters as the public’s primary, and most trusted source of political news (Hansard 2012) and although, with the rise of all other sources of news now available, the actual numbers tuning into the main national television news bulletins has been in decline, the BBC and ITV and, to a lesser extent Sky News, will remain major factors within the political communication landscape, and hence will continue to be important points of focus for scholars.<sup>xx</sup>

As the rate of change in the media landscape shows no signs of slowing down, so too the political landscape is in equal flux. The public’s disillusionment with the formal political

process, which was given particular potency by the 2009 MPs' expenses scandal, continues to be a major preoccupation of policymakers and scholars alike (Hansard 2012)<sup>xxi</sup>. The consequences of this are long term, but in the short term there have been two developments of interest to political communication scholars. First, there was the 2010 General Election in which no party succeeded in winning a majority of seats in the House of Commons and which led to the formation of Britain's first peace-time coalition government since 1935. Second, there has been the more recent rise of the UK Independence Party (UKIP) which many commentators have seen as the articulation of the 'plague on both your houses' attitude which reflects the current public mood. A YouGov Poll immediately after UKIP gained 23% of the vote in local government elections (May 2013) revealed that, after concerns about immigration and the European Union, "Unhappy with major parties" was the third most important reason given for voting for UKIP (YouGov)<sup>xxii</sup>.

One intriguing aspect of UKIP's success in 2013 is that the party has risen to become the third most popular party in the UK<sup>xxiii</sup> with no significant online profile and with national media coverage that has, for the most part, been either negative or patronising. Clearly a charismatic leader with good media skills has been a factor as, perhaps, has been his patronising treatment by the mainstream media. In the wake of the recent scandals concerning MPs' expenses and journalists' phone-hacking a popular notion has been created – particularly, but not exclusively, by UKIP - that sees the political and media establishments as engaged in a "conspiracy against the public". Nonetheless UKIP's political rise challenges a number of key assumptions that scholars have been making about the mediatisation of the political public sphere.

Thus, in terms of new research agendas for this, and other scholars in the field, there is no shortage of new challenges and approaches to the ongoing 'crisis in political communications' – if there is one.

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The Commentator <http://www.thecommentator.com>  
Tweetminster <http://tweetminster.co.uk/mps>  
YouGov <http://yougov.co.uk/news>

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## ENDNOTES

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<sup>i</sup> Originally a legal term relating to the sale of goods Act but entered into the political sphere in 1993 when the then Home Secretary John Reid, described the Home Office in these terms:  
[http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk\\_politics/5007148.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/5007148.stm) accessed 3 April 2013

<sup>ii</sup> This is not a 'Veblenist' techno-determinist argument, suggesting that changes in technology have made changes in the political public sphere inevitable; but nor is it to deny that technology can, in certain circumstances change, not just the quantity of information in circulation but its content as well. Brian Winston's argument is persuasive that whilst technologies evolve gradually their profile and application is always shaped by societal pressures, which tend to initially resist technologies that are seen as potentially subversive. (Winston 1998) The Internet for example – the concept of a global distributed network of computers – was first developed for the US military in the 1960s but it took another 30 to 40 years before it began to make a substantive impact on the wider public.

<sup>iii</sup> Between 1978 and 2010 I have worked as a political reporter, producer and programme editor for BBC TV and Radio, ITN, Channel Four News and Sky News.

<sup>iv</sup> 'Order- Order' can be Accessed at <http://order-order.com/>

<sup>v</sup> Huffington Post can be Accessed at <http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/>

<sup>vi</sup> Conservative Home can be Accessed at <http://conservativehome.blogs.com/>

<sup>vii</sup> Friends of Israel in UKIP" can be Accessed at  
<http://www.facebook.com/pages/Friends-of-Israel-in-UKIP/111727452249341?fref=ts> accessed 9/04/2013

<sup>viii</sup> British National Party warns, "Beware UKIP Zionists" by The Commentator Accessed 09/04/ 2013

<sup>ix</sup> Tweetminster is a media platform that analyses trends and links around Twitter in relation to UK politics and current affairs. Latest figures to be found at <http://tweetminster.co.uk/mps> reveal that there are 174 Labour MPs with Twitter accounts, 171 Conservatives, 44 Liberal Democrats and 20 from other parties.

<sup>x</sup> This paper – Margaretten and Gaber (2012) is not being submitted as part of this PhD.

<sup>xi</sup> Since publication of the Parliament Street paper in October 2012 Dai Havard's followers are now up to 83 but he is (at the time of writing April 2013) yet to tweet. Tom Watson's followers are now approaching 120,000 and he is still tweeting many times a day. –[Twitter.com/daihavard](https://twitter.com/daihavard) and [Twitter.com/tom\\_watson](https://twitter.com/tom_watson) accessed 3 April 2013

<sup>xii</sup> All the submitted pieces involve an element of "retrospective reflexivity", to a greater or lesser extent.

<sup>xiii</sup> This report for UNESCO called for efforts to be made to recalibrate the flow of news from North to South. It had major international ramifications which led to the US and the UK withdrawing from the organisation.

<sup>xiv</sup> The Mass Media and Global Environmental Learning Grant reference: L320253059

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<sup>xv</sup> The Power Inquiry was established in 2004. It was an independent inquiry into Britain's democracy, chaired by Helena Kennedy QC and funded by the Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust, its report 'Power to the people; was published in 2006.

<sup>xvi</sup> See Keeble and Mair (2013) for a range of contributions to the post-Leveson debate.

<sup>xvii</sup> See Jackson (2011) who, as a marketing academic, brings a different perspective to bear on this debate.

<sup>xviii</sup> My argument that the 2010 election had been virtually 'policy free' was contested by Sky News' Political Editor, Adam Boulton, in Boulton (2012), who argued that the three televised leaders' debates represented a significant policy input into the campaign. I suggest, and suggested directly to Boulton, that the content of the debates made little impact on the media's reporting of the election which remained fixated on the 'horse race'; even the reporting of the debates was in terms of who won or lost rather than what was said.

<sup>xix</sup> Quoted in Mattinson (2010)

<sup>xx</sup> According to an iCG poll for Press Gazette (31/03/2010) respondents, asked to name the print publication, broadcast news outlet or website, "you most trust when it comes to political news" responded:

- 1 - BBC News (online, TV and radio): (50.3 per cent)
- 2 - Sky News (6.5 per cent)
- 3 - ITV national news (5.3 per cent)
- 4 - I trust no-one when it comes to political news (five per cent)
- 5 - ITV regional news (3.7 per cent)
- 6 - The Times (3.3 per cent)
- 7 - Daily Mail (2.5 per cent)
- 8 - Channel 4 News (2.3 per cent)
- 9 - The Daily Telegraph (1.9 per cent)
- 10 - The Guardian (1.8 per cent)

<sup>xxi</sup> According to the Hansard Audit of Political Engagement 2012, 42% of the public say they are interested in politics – this is down 16 points since 2011 and the lowest level ever recorded in the nine-year Audit series).

<sup>xxii</sup> YouGov Poll 3 May 2013 "Which of the following list best reflects your reasons for voting UKIP? (Please tick up to three) Want immigration reduced 76%, Want Britain to leave EU 59%. Unhappy with major parties 47%, Unhappy with Cameron Government 25%" Accessed at: <http://yougov.co.uk/news/2013/05/03/immigration-and-europe-give-ukip-appeal/>

<sup>xxiii</sup> The latest YouGiv poll puts 13/05/2013) puts Labour on 38%, the Conservatives on 31%, UKIP on 14%; and the Liberal Democrats on 10% available at <http://yougov.co.uk/news/2013/05/14/update-labour-lead-7/> Accessed 14/05/2013.