Journalism and Democracy
An evaluation of the political public sphere

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JOURNALISM AND DEMOCRACY

‘Brian McNair deftly explores the currently much lamented malaise of politics and journalism at the turn of the century in a book that is as lively as it is thorough and judicious.’

Denis McQuail, University of Southampton

The public sphere is said to be in crisis. Dumbing down, tabloidisation, infotainment and spin are alleged to contaminate it, adversely affecting the quality of political journalism and of democracy itself. There is a pervasive pessimism about the relationship between the media and democracy, and widespread concern for the future of the political process.

Journalism and Democracy challenges this orthodoxy, arguing instead for an alternative, more optimistic evaluation of the contemporary public sphere and its contribution to the political process. Brian McNair argues not only that the quantity of political information in mass circulation has expanded hugely in the late twentieth century, but that political journalism has become steadily more rigorous and effective in its criticism of elites, more accessible to the public, and more thorough in its coverage of the political process.

Journalism and Democracy combines textual analysis and extensive indepth interviews with political journalists, editors, presenters and documentary makers. In separate chapters devoted to the political news agenda, the political interview, punditry, public access media and spin doctoring, McNair considers whether dumbing down is a genuinely new trend in political journalism, or an expression of moral panic, provoked by suspicion of mass involvement in culture.

Brian McNair is Reader in the Department of Film and Media Studies at Stirling University and a member of the Stirling Media Research Institute. He is the author of News and Journalism in the UK (3rd edition, 1999), An Introduction to Political Communication (2nd edition, 1999) and The Sociology of Journalism (1998).
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## CONTENTS

*List of tables and figures*  
Preface and acknowledgements  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Journalism and democracy: the debate</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>The political public sphere: an anatomy</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Policy, process, performance and sleaze: an evaluation of the political news agenda</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>The interpretative moment: the journalism of commentary and analysis</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>The interrogative moment: the British political interview</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>The sound of the crowd: access and the political media</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>‘Spin, whores spin’: the demonisation of political public relations</td>
<td>122</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>The media and politics, 1992–97</td>
<td>140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Political journalism and the crisis of mass representation</td>
<td>171</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes  
Bibliography  
Index
LIST OF TABLES AND FIGURES

Tables

Table 2.1  The political media market 15
Table 2.2  Political newsworthiness ratings in the British media, November 1996 17
Table 3.1  The political news agenda 47
Table 8.1  Editorial allegiances in the 1997 general election 142

Figures

Figure 2.1  The public sphere: a model 30
Figure 2.2  Circulation of British national daily newspapers, 1992–99 34
Figure 8.1  The Conservative press surplus, 1970–97 155
The role of journalism in the political process has been a topic of public debate – and a focus of political struggle – ever since there have been print media in Britain. Depending on the nature of the prevailing political regime, journalists and their editors have at various times in British history been executed, imprisoned, deported and subject to punitive taxation. In the more liberal times of the late twentieth century, as media coverage of politics has expanded and the relationship of journalists to the democratic process been transformed, the personal stakes for dissenters may not be so high as in the past, but the debate about the media’s role in politics has continued, indeed intensified. Few will deny that now, to a greater extent than ever before, the media are politics, and politics are the media. The implications of this merging of the real and mediated accounts of the real are the principal subject of this book.

While written with the widest possible readership in mind, it is directed principally at two groups. The academic community, first – researchers, teachers and students of political communication – will find it, I hope, a useful addition to the rapidly expanding literature on ‘mediated democracy’.

Second, it is intended for the practitioners of political communication – the political journalists themselves, some of whom have written and reported nearly as much in recent years about the ‘mediatisation’ of the political process as they have about policy; and also the public relations professionals, the ‘spin doctors’ of current media demonology. These two groups – academics, on the one hand, and makers of political communication on the other – often speak in different languages, but they have in common an interest in the state of our mass-mediated democracy; a form of polity, unique to the age of mass communication and now the standard in all advanced capitalist societies, over which journalists and their media organisations stand not merely as reporters and analysts, but as participants in, and producers of what we all – citizens, politicians and their communication advisors, and journalists – experience as political reality.
The prevailing orthodoxy amongst both academic and journalistic writers on British political culture – and this is true irrespective of their place on the ideological spectrum – is that we are living in a time of crisis: the ‘crisis of public communication’, according to Jay Blumler and Michael Gurevitch (1995); ‘the death of news’, as the New Statesman put it in 1998;1 the era of ‘dumbing down’. All such phrases are intended to suggest that, though we live amidst apparent communicative plenty, we are actually being starved of information – starved, that is, of the right kind of information; the kind that we require to function politically and to perform our civic duties. We live in an era of proliferating media outlets, it is generally acknowledged, but their content is increasingly shaped by the low, base needs of commerce and profit rather than the higher motivations of culture and civic duty. In so far as the media are concerned, more most definitely means less.

This book tests these views on the specific terrain of politics. Sir John Birt, whose position as Director General of the BBC in the 1990s frequently found him negotiating controversy between the media and the political system, asked in a 1995 speech if ‘the modern media [are] a force for good or for ill’ in British politics.2 That is not a bad way of posing the question which this book addresses. Unpacking it a little, I examine in the following chapters the extent to which the modern political process, in its public, mass-mediated manifestation, can be regarded as the degraded product of market-driven journalistic practice on the one hand, and ever more sophisticated and sinister news management by politicians on the other. Or, contrary to the prevailing critical orthodoxy, are there grounds for claiming that the evolution of mass media in the late twentieth century and into the new millennium has opened up political affairs to the public in a way which is more than superficial? Can we begin to picture, perhaps for the first time in British political history, a truly democratic public sphere, accessible to more people than ever before, uniquely expressive of popular concerns, and capable of watching over the activities of our power elites? No one will dispute that political journalism presents a mediated, manufactured version of political reality: of political life and processes, issues and events. This book evaluates that version of the real, and asks – what are its positive and negative characteristics? How does it match up to what, in an ideal world, we would wish our journalists to write and speak about politics?

I make three qualifications at the outset. First, this is a study of journalism and democracy in a particular society (Britain) at a time of more than usually rapid political, social and cultural change, symbolised most dramatically by the end of Conservative government and the return of the Labour Party to office in May 1997 after eighteen years in opposition. The political and journalistic cultures it describes were and remain fluid and volatile, as one political elite replaced another in government, and as the introduction of
new communication technologies has continued to revolutionise the processes of journalistic production.

Secondly, the book appears at a time of fundamental change in the constitution and shape of the political system itself, with Europeanisation on the one hand, and devolution on the other, now fully institutionalised processes. The concepts of Britain and of Britishness, of the United Kingdom and the Englishness of its majority, are mutating in relation to Scottishness, Europeanness, Northern Irishness, Welshness, all of which evolving identities reverberate continually on the political media, both as topics of coverage and as conditions of production. Underpinning constitutional change, however, and for some time to come, there remains an unmistakeably British political culture, centred on Westminster and mediated by a ‘national’ journalism which is consumed throughout the United Kingdom, alongside whatever more local journalisms exist. This book, written by a Scotsman working in a Scottish university, directly addresses the UK-level polity only, and the media which support it.3

And third, anything said about the political media of the United Kingdom in this book must be qualified with the recognition that we British are, as a culture, relatively advantaged in the continuing strength and vitality of our public service broadcasting system. After presenting a rather up-beat paper on the future of British broadcast journalism to an academic gathering in Boulder, Colorado,4 I was reminded by a colleague from New Zealand that not every country had the luxury of a BBC, and could not benefit from the ‘levelling up’ effect on the quality of other media output which I had argued a strong public service broadcaster to have. In this sense, my conclusions about British political journalism apply in the first instance only to the United Kingdom, and are not necessarily applicable to the political cultures of advanced capitalism in general. Readers in other countries will determine for themselves how relevant the British experience is to their own.

Some acknowledgements. The research and writing time without which the book could not have been produced draw on the Political Communication and Democracy project undertaken at the University of Stirling between 1996 and 1998, in collaboration with Philip Schlesinger and David Miller, and funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (award reference L126251022). The University of Stirling also contributed a semester of sabbatical leave to the project, gratefully acknowledged here. Research assistants Will Dinan and Deidre Kevin were crucial supports in the data-gathering and preparation which the project required.

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PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

of political journalism who attended the ESRC-organised seminar on political communication held at Stirling in November 1997 were also welcome.

I am particularly grateful to the many journalists, media managers and political communication professionals who granted interviews for the research, on or off the record. Whether they agree with my conclusions or not, I hope they will find what I have made of their comments useful in the development of their own thinking about the relationship between journalism and democracy.

Many thanks also to Rebecca Barden and Chris Cudmore at Routledge, who guided the book to swift and timely publication.

Brian McNair
September 1999
Modern politics are largely mediated politics, experienced by the great majority of citizens at one remove, through their print and broadcast media of choice. Any study of democracy in contemporary conditions is therefore also a study of how the media report and interpret political events and issues; of how they facilitate the efforts of politicians to persuade their electorates of the correctness of policies and programmes; of how they themselves (i.e., editorial staff, management and proprietors) influence the political process and shape public opinion. The political process, in its public manifestation, reaches citizens as the product of a set of journalistic codes and practices (the prevailing system of newsvalues, styles of interviewing, impartiality and objectivity guidelines), which interact with and are shaped by politicians and their professional communication advisors as they negotiate access to, or otherwise seek to influence the output of, political media in ways favourable to themselves. The accounts of political reality provided by the media are complex constructions embodying the communicative work of both groups, which ideally should, but need not always meet the standards of information accuracy and objectivity expected of political communication in a liberal democracy.

The political media are important because, as Anthony Sampson puts it, ‘a mature democracy depends on having an educated electorate, informed and connected through parliament’ (1996, p. 47), and it is principally through the media that such an electorate can be formed. That the actions of government and the state, and the efforts of competing parties and interests to exercise political power, should be underpinned and legitimised by critical scrutiny and informed debate facilitated by the institutions of the media is a normative assumption uniting the political spectrum from left to right. Analysts and critics may dispute the extent to which Britain has a properly functioning ‘public sphere’ – as Jurgen Habermas called that communal communicative space in which ‘private people come together as a public’ (1989, p. 27) – but all agree that such a space should exist, and that the media are at its core. Thus, in debates about the state of the democratic polity journalists figure large, and
those who criticise the way in which the public sphere has actually developed focus their attacks on the media.

The ‘crisis of public communication’ identified by Jay Blumler and Michael Gurevitch in their book of the same name (1995) refers principally to two phenomena: firstly, a decline in the quality of political journalism, driven by what are variously described as processes of commercialisation, tabloidisation, Americanisation and, in the currently fashionable vernacular, ‘dumbing down’ – in short, the ascendancy of ‘infotainment’ over ‘serious’ reportage and analysis of politics. Nick Cohen typifies the argument when he writes of broadcast journalism in the New Statesman that ‘liberal news – by which I mean impartial coverage of issues of public importance – is in crisis. Its practitioners are nervous and unloved. Its self-confidence has been undermined by the preposterous but dominant intellectual fashion of postmodernism.’

The assertion of crisis alludes, secondly, to a change for the worse in the relationship between journalists and politicians; an unwelcome shift in the balance of power between them, attributed in some variants of the thesis to the rise of the professional political communication specialists – the media consultants, communications managers and spin doctors who today inhabit the corridors and committee rooms of power – and, in others, to the destabilising effects of an overpowerful political media whose practitioners have gotten above themselves.

This book tests these assertions, thus entering a debate which straddles the sometimes separate worlds of the academic analyst and the journalistic commentator, as it blurs the ideological polarities of left and right. One is just as likely to encounter a lament for the decline of political journalism in the pages of the right-wing Spectator magazine as in the left-of-centre New Statesman, and in the Guardian as much as the Daily Telegraph. This book is not about the relative merits of different political ideas, then, but rather the capacity of our common media system – our public sphere – to service and support the democratic process for the benefit of the people as a whole, in accordance with the principles established to govern their operation at the birth of liberal capitalism in Britain some four centuries ago, and still held to be valid today. It is a debate which transcends politics and unites all species of partisan, all varieties of ideological warrior, in common contemplation of what the emergence of mass communication in the last century of the second millenium means for the present and future quality of our democratic polity. For that reason, the arguments draw on the widest possible range of academic and non-academic sources, as presented in books, articles, speeches and lectures, media interviews and analyses, and in interviews with practitioners of political journalism (and political communication) conducted by the author over a period of two years in 1997 and 1998.

Many significant voices are absent, nonetheless – most notably, those of the public themselves: that great mass of ordinary citizens who comprise the greatest
part of the audience for political journalism, and for whose hypothetical collective benefit the whole infernal machinery of political communication functions. What do they think of the issues debated so intensely by academics, journalists and politicians on their behalf? In this study I have not sought to access their views directly. I have, however, devoted a chapter to ‘the sound of the crowd’, by which I mean the noise emanating from those proliferating spaces in the media given over to the facilitation of public access, such as political talk shows, phone-ins and related programme formats. In that chapter, and indeed whenever popular political culture is discussed, I have rejected the assumption of many contributors to this debate that popular means irrational and tabloid means trash; that entertainment cannot at the same time be informative; that serious news cannot at the same time be of human interest.

Although my status as an academic defines me as a member of the elite group whose collective criticisms of political journalism are often challenged in the following pages, I am at the same time a fully paid-up member of the mass audience whose democratic rights and civic responsibilities drive the work, and I treat its patterns of media consumption with appropriate respect. I begin from the assumption that today’s media audiences are, in historical and cross-cultural perspective, relatively highly educated, well-informed, semiologically sophisticated, active consumers of media.

The crisis of the political media

What, then, is the specific nature of the ‘crisis’? Reading the pages of academic texts and newspaper articles in recent years, or listening to the reportage and commentaries of the broadcasters, one would have noted at various times all of the following criticisms being made of political journalism.

Dumbing down and the rise of infotainment

Firstly, the quantity of what is usually described as ‘serious’ political journalism circulating in the public sphere has steadily declined, and its substantive political content been diluted, to the detriment of the democratic process. The political media have been dumbing down, to use the phrase which has now become a routine element of British media commentary. German sociologist Jurgen Habermas, whose considered views on these issues, developed over three decades, underpin most variants of the dumbing down thesis, argues that the public sphere, while it has expanded in the course of the twentieth century to include the population as a whole (acknowledged by all but the most overtly reactionary of commentators to be a positive development), has at the same time been degraded by the growing influence of private, commercial interests on the output of media organisations (1989). In the process, the pursuit of profit has replaced that of serving the public interest as the driving force of journalism. News
producers – even those like the BBC which are free of direct commercial pressures – have been required to become more and more oriented towards ratings, subordinating the journalistic obligation to inform to the more audience-friendly task of supplying entertainment. The result of these pressures has been an explosion of infotainment – journalism in which entertainment values take precedence over information content, presented at an intellectual level low enough to appeal to the mass audiences which comprise the major media markets (‘the lowest common denominator’, as critics frequently express it). Lower, too, than a healthy democracy demands. Political journalism is said to be conforming to the pressures of tabloidisation observed elsewhere in the media: a term which, used interchangeably with dumbing down and infotainment, functions as shorthand for the offence, as it is often characterised, of catering for popular tastes.

One manifestation of this trend would be the media’s contemporary fascination with elite deviance (sexual, financial or moral), as in the cases of Conservative and Labour politicians in Britain throughout the 1990s, and of course Bill Clinton, whose ‘sex addiction’ was a prominent theme of political journalism in Britain as well as the United States during the 1990s, exemplified by coverage of the Monica Lewinsky scandal in 1998–9. The ‘sleaze’ agenda (see Chapter 3) which featured prominently in British and American political news for most of that decade was alleged to be driven by market forces rather than public interest, in so far as the relentless commodification of journalism and the ever-increasing competitiveness of the media market put a commercial premium on sensationalism and prurience in coverage of politics.

**Political information overload**

Another criticism, which at first sight appears to stand in contradiction to the notion of dumbing down, asserts not that there is too little serious politics in the media, but too much. All observers agree that the media – and news media in particular – have expanded exponentially in the late twentieth century, and are likely to continue doing so for some time to come. Coverage of politics has always been at the heart of the British news agenda and, as the space available to news media has increased, so too has coverage of politics. David Walker has suggested that this amounts to a kind of political information overload and that, by boring audiences to distraction, ‘the massive scale of coverage merely diminishes public interest in politics’. During and after the 1997 general election, the broadcasters, and the BBC in particular, were accused of overloading their audiences with too much political coverage, resulting in the lower than usual ratings achieved by news programmes during the campaign period (see Chapter 8).
Associated with this criticism is the perception that a quantitatively excessive political journalism has at the same time become too elitist or insider-oriented in its subject-matter; too focused on what commentators often refer to as the ‘horse-race’ – the process of political competition, and the race for electoral victory – and not enough on policy substance. Walker writes of the BBC’s political journalism (and the charge would apply equally to most other news organisations) that it suffers from ‘a fixation on party politics to the exclusion of matters of power and policy’, deriving in large part from excessive journalistic dependence on political sources.

An excess of interpretation

Another trend identified by critics is the tendency towards more interpretation and commentary as a proportion of total output, and the relative decline of straight reportage. Bob Franklin asserts that ‘the gallery tradition of reporting parliament is dead’ (1997, p. 232), adding his voice to those who interpret this as part of the wider process of tabloidisation/ dumbing down of the British media. Ralph Negrine, too, sees the decline of straight parliamentary reporting as evidence of ‘the dangers of commercialisation’ (1996, p. 76). Media pundit Roy Greenslade suggests that the excessive quantity of political journalism now in circulation has resulted in a tendency to empty pontification, caused by the need to fill the space created for politics in the news and current affairs schedules. Columnist Iain MacWhirter argues that ‘the growth of the commentary industry is another manifestation of our degenerating political culture’.

Hyperadversarialism

Degeneration of the political culture is also alleged in the trend towards more adversarial techniques of political interviewing seen in broadcast journalism. Writing of America, but in terms which apply with no less force to the United Kingdom, James Fallows accuses political journalism of hyperadversarialism – a combative style in which coverage of politics begins to resemble that sub-genre of natural history broadcasting where the harsh and unending struggle for survival is portrayed as the only point of existence. Journalists, he argues, now place ‘a relentless emphasis’ on ‘the cynical game of politics’, undermining the integrity of public life by ‘implying day after day that the political sphere is mainly an arena in which ambitious politicians struggle for dominance, rather than a structure in which citizens can deal with wearisome collective problems’ (1996, p. 31). Where Habermas identified the deradicalising impact of commercialisation on the late nineteenth century press, Fallows has argued in turn that late twentieth century broadcasting was effectively depoliticised, the
substance of political debate gradually being replaced by the superficial, entertainment-led spectacle of adversarial game-playing. Political journalism, he argues, has become excessively gladiatorial.

**Excessive balance and outmoded impartiality**

At other times, however, and in other contexts, political journalism is said to be not opinionated or gladiatorial enough, constrained instead by too much balance, artificial notions of neutrality, too-rigidly defined impartiality. During the 1997 general election, for example, critics including the future prime minister Tony Blair accused the BBC’s political journalists of sticking too closely to the balance guidelines, and of producing unengaging, formulaic, ‘tit-for-tat’ news which failed to involve audiences in the democratic process. These criticisms encouraged both of the main British broadcast news providers, the BBC and ITN, to undertake far-reaching post-election reviews of how political journalism should be produced and packaged (see Chapter 8).

**Political public relations and the rise of spin**

Last, but by no means least of the criticisms of political journalism currently in the public domain is the impact upon its content of public relations in its various forms, such as governmental information management, issues and image management, lobbying, and ‘spin’. Post-WWII, writes Habermas in the classic statement of the problem, ‘in the advanced countries of the West, they [public relations] have come to dominate the public sphere’, and have become ‘a key phenomenon for the diagnosis of that realm’ (1989, p. 192). The methods and practices of public relations are said to subvert the normative integrity of the public sphere by transforming it into a vehicle for the pursuit of vested interests, and the subordination of the public interest. In America, says Fallows, public relations has moved to ‘the centre’ of the presidency, and thus to the centre of political journalism (1996). Journalists have become dependent, or at the very least over-reliant, on the professional managers of information and image, to the detriment of the quality of their output, and of the citizens’ access to rational information.

Similar criticisms are frequently heard in relation to the United Kingdom, where the professionalisation of political advocacy is almost universally viewed as a negative trend, articulated through what I call in Chapter 7 ‘the demonology of spin’, denounced as another manifestation of Americanisation, to be condemned not only for the way in which spin doctors and other communication professionals seek to massage the news agenda on behalf of political clients, but for the reaction they have provoked from journalists who (as was noted above) are alleged to spend more and more time covering the process of political advocacy – ‘the game’ – than they do the ‘real issues’ of political life. Since
New Labour’s election in May 1997 (and indeed for some time before that when it was re-emerging as an electable force) the British media have been engaged in more or less continuous commentary and speculation about the party’s information management system, and its adverse impact on journalists’ ability to report politics objectively.

Causes of the crisis

The above criticisms of political media are usually linked to two sets of causes. Advocates of economic causation, on the one hand, argue that as political media have become more audience-led they have been subject to processes of marketisation, commercialisation and commodification. All these terms suggest, accurately enough, that contemporary journalism exists primarily in commodity form, to be sold in a media marketplace alongside other cultural products. Journalists and their editors must therefore compete for market share (as reflected in TV and radio ratings, newspaper and periodical circulations, and shares of advertising revenue). They are inclined to prioritise the popular over the pertinent, the racy over the relevant, the weird over the worthy. Commodification has been accompanied by the proliferation of news ‘brands’, as competing organisations employ ever more sophisticated marketing techniques to target specific audiences of differing demographic profiles. The emergence of professional news management at the heart of the political process is also seen from this perspective as economically driven, parallelling as it does the expansion of political advertising, value research, and other business techniques which originated as means of influencing, through the media, public opinion about private interests in turn of the century America, and were then exported to the rest of the capitalist world as the twentieth century progressed.

The substantive information content of political journalism is said to be diluted not only by market-driven commercialisation, however (and the implied ascendancy of consumer-friendly style over substance), but by a second group of causes: the negative impact of new technologies on news-gathering and presentation. News is faster, more immediate, more ‘live’ than ever before, it is commonly agreed. But not necessarily more informative. On the contrary, as one senior broadcast journalist puts it: ‘the technology [of news production] enables us to package, graphicise and meld five minutes of old TV information into sixty seconds of new TV time – the whizz and bang of such presentation may be enticing but the content reduction is so acute that normal debate is in danger of being reduced to the absurd.’ There is a crisis, then, caused not just by the impact of commercialisation on journalistic style and content, but by the demands of televisual form itself, arising from the constraints which everfaster, evermore ‘real-time’ newsgathering possibilities place on the ability of journalists to analyse and explain complex political reality.
Technological evolution is also causally implicated in the rise of public relations and spin. The rapid growth since the early twentieth century of communication consultancy, media advisors and spin doctors to fill what Jay Blumler calls the ‘news holes’ (1997) created by the technology-driven expansion of journalistic outlets has made the media highly dependent on and thus more vulnerable to manipulation by the spin doctors and the seductions of manufactured political news – those political pseudo-events designed expressly to attract media attention and maximise the favourable publicity received by political actors. Journalistic dependence on political sources for raw material to make into news is identified by many observers as a key element in the contemporary crisis of political communication.

**Journalism and the degeneration of the public sphere**

From the identification of the above trends and their causes is derived the conclusion that rather than support the democratic process as, in the ideal scheme of things, it should be doing, journalism has become an alienating, cynicism-inducing, narcoticising force in our political culture, turning people off citizenship rather than equipping them to fulfil their democratic potential. Diminishing rates of electoral participation and increasing voter volatility are among the consequences often alleged of this trend. Others include the undermining of democracy through the strengthening of the power of political elites, as when Mannheim asserts of the United States that the rise of television in the latter half of the twentieth century has produced ‘a continuing qualitative reduction of the intellectual content of political discourse among the mass of American citizens’ (quoted in Denton, 1998, p. 31). This ‘may enable an elite which preserves the requisite knowledge, skills, and resources more effectively to manipulate the polity’. American political scientist Doris Graber states that ‘the news product has deteriorated when judged as a resource for public opinion formation’ (quoted in Blumler and Gurevitch, 1995, p. 66), while Blumler and Gurevitch believe that in Britain ‘the political communication process now tends to strain against, rather than with the grain of citizenship’ (Ibid., p. 203). Also writing of the UK (and with reference to approximately the same period as is covered in this book) Stephen Coleman suggests that ‘designer politics’ and ‘electoral consumerism’ have ‘diminished the health of democratic culture, introducing the ethos (and the absence of ethics) of commerce rather than community into the battle for political success’ (1998, p. 687).

Pierre Bourdieu’s *On Television and Journalism* adds to the critical ranks with the argument (derived from French examples but applicable in most respects to the British case) that entertainment-driven tendencies in political coverage produce ‘a cynical view’ (1998, p. 5) amongst electors, while Anthony Sampson has written that the role of political journalism in ‘providing the chief context for information and understanding for the public’ is being undermined by ‘the
media’s ability to confuse news with entertainment’ (1996, p. 42). ‘As the media have become more pervasive and entertaining’, he argues, connecting this trend to the wider crisis of democracy, ‘parliament itself is being marginalised in the national debate’ (ibid., p. 47). Ex-BBC journalist John Cole writes in his memoirs that the growing emphasis on entertainment in political journalism has ‘created a public reluctance to make the effort that is needed for a worthwhile understanding of politics’ (1996, p. 450).

Others, by contrast, argue not that contemporary political journalism creates a lazy citizenry and an excessively powerful elite but, on the contrary, an excessively unruly mass and a correspondingly weak governing class – that journalists have become too subversive of authority, too demagogic, too powerful and pro-active in setting agendas over the heads of elected politicians. Political elites are not being shored up in this line of reasoning but are being destabilised, and their authority undermined, to the detriment of good government. David Goodhart, for example, asserts that the political media are ‘usurping’ the authority of government in Britain. The intense media coverage of the Monica Lewinsky scandal in 1998 and 1999 has been argued by some to show that similar processes are evident in the United States (although, of course, President Clinton bounced back from several media-generated ordeals, up to and including his Senate trial for impeachment, and was able to complete his second term of office).

Broadcast journalist Nik Gowing has argued that the ‘liveness’ and immediacy of foreign news in the era of twenty-four hour ‘rolling’ coverage presents political decision-makers with a qualitatively new dilemma. Politicians, he writes, ‘fear that emotive pictures provided by real-time TV coverage forces them into an impulsive policy response when the reality on the ground is different’ (1994, p. 76). Although foreign news coverage ‘does not necessarily dictate policy responses’ (his emphasis), he finds that it can be ‘a powerful influence in problem recognition, which in turn helps to shape the foreign policy agenda’ (ibid., p. 18). Applying Gowing’s analysis to the field of political journalism, and assuming that domestic policy-making and decision-taking are not immune to the impact of these media-generated perceptions and pressures (and there is no reason why they should be), the rationality which normative theory insists should drive public policy debate is potentially undermined by an evolving media environment which places ever-increasing value on the speed and ubiquity of news coverage.

Although they are often in rather dramatic opposition to each other (the media, one might think, cannot be destabilising political elites at one moment, and strengthening their power at the expense of an apathetic, cynical citizenry in another), a number of common assumptions link the approaches underpinning these critical perspectives – approaches which are pessimistic in so far as they amount to the argument that the more political journalism we get, the less democratic our society becomes. Those assumptions are: